

# **Making Plain/s Space: the literary geographies of Cather, Kroetsch, and Heat-Moon**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines literary texts as place-making conduits in the case of the North American region commonly referred to as the Great Plains or the prairies. From a discursive and historicist perspective, it demonstrates how Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!*, Robert Kroetsch's poems 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'Seed Catalogue', and William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* constitute key twentieth-century literary geographies that demarcate a shift in the way the land on the ground has been overlaid with spatial tropes and narrative structures. The direction of the shift, it is argued here, is from a narrow regionalism that conceives of place as enclosed, rooted, and essentialist towards a 'middle ground' in which cultural and natural forces come into contact, conflict, as well as collaboration in a complex dialogic negotiation of power, presence, survival, and belonging (Richard White).

In setting out a critical framework, the first chapter identifies a culturally dominant meta-narrative of fall and recovery as a powerful ideological influence on how the Plains has been represented and understood. It is shown how, in mapping the region along linear wilderness-garden and desert-landscape trajectories, artists and critics alike have tended to represent the place in binary and essentialist terms as landscape (not wilderness), rooted (not routed), and authentic (not hybrid). Countering this discourse is an archaeological mode of inquiry that decentres linear narratives of progressive recovery/fall by unearthing local particulars. What emerges instead are palimpsest and rhizomatic deep maps that trace intercultural, transnational, and global movements operating beneath, across, and above the levels of region and nation and hence challenge narrow definitions of either. Thus, in addition to a formal dispersion of textual and geographical space, the deep maps also count the cost of empire and nation building and address socio-political issues of ethnicity, ecology, inhabitation, and economics. Through close readings of Cather, Kroetsch, and Heat-Moon's literary geographies, I proceed to situate them in relation to this matrix of prairie place-making and elaborate on how they variously contribute to, dispute, and seek to displace it.

# Contents

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction   | 1   |
| 1. Towards a Literary Geography of the Great Plains: tropes, narratives, discourse | 9   |
| 2. The Imperial Plains Place of Willa Cather's <i>O Pioneers!</i>                  | 63  |
| 3. A Palimpsest of Prairie: Robert Kroetsch's early field-note poems               | 127 |
| 4. <i>PrairyErth</i> : re-troping the Plains place                                 | 200 |
| Conclusion: 'Posting' the Plains – beyond frontier, region, and nation             | 271 |
| Appendix   | 281 |
| Notes  | 284 |
| Bibliography   | 298 |

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For any errors or inadequacies that may remain in this work, the responsibility is entirely mine.



# Abbreviations

|     |                              |
|-----|------------------------------|
| ALL | <i>A Lost Lady</i>           |
| CFN | <i>Completed Field Notes</i> |
| MA  | <i>My Ántonia</i>            |
| OP  | <i>O Pioneers!</i>           |
| PE  | <i>PrairieEarth</i>          |

## Introduction

This dissertation is a study in the literary making of place. It offers a close reading of four texts that function as conduits for the lifting of a regional space to literary expression. The texts in question are Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* (1913), Robert Kroetsch's field-note poems 'Stone Hammer Poem' (1973) and 'Seed Catalogue' (1977), and William Least Heat-Moon's genre-defying essay or 'geo-grafictione', *PrairyErth – a deep map* (1991).<sup>1</sup> The place and space they are concerned with is the central grasslands of North America, the American and Canadian region commonly referred to as the Great Plains or the prairies.

From a historical point of view, the literary making of the Plains as a regional place may be conceived as an overlaying of tropes and narrative structures onto the always already land on the ground. By doing so, it becomes possible, firstly, to think of place in the words of Henri Lefebvre as a representational space 'which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.'<sup>2</sup> Secondly, by tracing the genealogy of this figurative overlaying, we can begin to outline historical discourses – what I choose to call literary geographies – that have not only provided the region with a distinct face and flavour, but also influenced the way it has been imagined, understood, and inhabited. In this regard, representational spaces are not merely symbolic. They also take part in a wider cultural negotiation and social production of space. Textual spaces have, as Gillian Rose explains, a discursive function that

refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought,  
and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. In other words, discourse

is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it.<sup>3</sup>

It is when we adopt this discursive perspective that we can see how the texts by Cather, Kroetsch, and Heat-Moon mark key moments in the literary making of the Plains during the twentieth century. To explicate these moments in a wider cultural context, however, it is necessary first to establish a spatio-historical framework. The opening chapter of this dissertation does so by undertaking a critical survey of the figurative overlaying of the prairies in literature. In doing so, it identifies key nodal points of a wider discourse on space and place that historically has exerted a powerful influence on the shaping of the region. Among its key points we find wilderness, wasteland, landscape, and garden tropes. These tropical nodal points repeatedly demarcate linear wilderness-garden and desert-landscape trajectories of a culturally dominant meta-narrative of fall and recovery. As we shall see, these binary tropes and trajectories are not confined to fiction but are in wide circulation in diaries, journalism, political speeches, paintings, film and so on.

Countering this discursive dominant, the introductory chapter also identifies reversals and latterly displacements of these images and plot lines in recent Plains literature. In particular, it looks at a number of non-linear tropes and narrative structuring devices aimed at resisting and subverting this dominant spatial discourse through strategies that are best described as deconstructivist. In accordance with the approach outlined above, the chapter does so by situating these conflicting attempts at literary regioning in the context of a wider cultural discourse on the prairies. It considers, for example, deconstructive tropes and narratives in relation to an imperial-colonial advance westward in which visual constructs such as cartography and

landscape prospects played an important role materially as well as ideologically in the formation of progressive and pastoral ideals.

Having delineated a regional literary geography in this way, the spatio-historical framework of the introductory chapter subsequently serves as a point of reference for an explication of the ways in which the literary geographies of Cather, Kroetsch, and Heat-Moon variously contribute to, resist, and contest salient components of a history of prairie place-making. A conventional view of the region's literary history may suggest that the texts represent very different genres and periods and have little in common. By contrast, as I have already intimated, it is argued here that from a spatial point of view they share significant common ground and mark salient moments in the literary making of the Plains. In a representational mode that displays distinct traces of classicism, nineteenth-century representational realism as well as modernism, *O Pioneers!* recounts from the vantage point of the 1910s how Euro-American settlers transformed a seeming prairie void into a rich agrarian landscape during the 1880s and 90s. By comparison and contrast, Robert Kroetsch's early long poems undertake a genealogical enquiry into the Canadian Plains from the perspective of the 1970s and a Euro-American modernist and post-structuralist tradition of writing poetry on and of space and place. Most notably, the poet acknowledges his debt to William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (1946), Charles Olson's principle of composition by field, and the thinking of European post-structuralists such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Finally, William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairieErth* deep maps Chase County, Kansas in the late 1980s from a hybrid point of view that draws on indigenous and ecological sources while inscribing itself into an American tradition of place and travel writing dating back to Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).

One compelling reason for bringing three such seemingly incongruous literary geographies together, then, is that through their tropical overlaying they engage with a number of inter- and trans-cultural as well as socio-political aspects of place-making in the case of a region that has all too often been portrayed in dichotomous terms as either wasteland or garden. In addition to aesthetic and intertextual concerns, the texts harbour a number of imperial-colonial, ethnic, and environmental concerns which impact on the construction of spatial history and identity as, for example, regional and national as opposed to trans- and post-national, and unified and enclosed as opposed to fragmented and transgressing. In this sense, the over- and indeterminacy of literary landscapes is illuminating because it allows us to conceive of the Plains not as a place of fixed boundaries and identities but as an in-between zone where conflicting forces and dissenting actors come into contact.

One important consequence of adopting a discursive approach to space and place, then, is that this study is not primarily interested in determining the extent to which the region's physical geography may have influenced literary geographies or how leading writers may have formulated an essential prairie aesthetics or sense of place by adapting to the great fact of the land itself.<sup>4</sup> Instead, literary geographies are approached here as representational spaces – topoi – where territorial questions of power, dominance, belonging and the *cultural* nature of space and place continue to be engendered and debated.

Following the introductory chapter, the detailed inquiry into how this is done gets under way during a close reading of place-making in Cather's *O Pioneers!* from an imperial-colonial perspective. The chapter examines how the transfer of old-world spatial and visual constructs shape and reify the pioneer Plains of the exilic author's childhood. In particular, it looks at how the imperial migrations of wilderness and

landscape void and gloss over particulars of the pre-settlement landscape and the settlement process itself. In constituting a recovery narrative, it is argued that they not only legitimise settlement but also relegate historical violence and subjugation to a mythic, pre-historic past. Having thus identified a recovery narrative at the ideational centre of the novel, the chapter then assesses the extent to which Cather's literary place-making adheres and contributes 'to the complex of traditional ideas that had accumulated around the idea of the "Frontier" since colonial times, including the concept of pioneering as a defining national mission'.<sup>5</sup> This reveals the presence in her literary landscape of a pluralism that is restricted to and valorises ethno-racially white European cultures. In one respect, this presence signals a scepticism towards prominent versions of the frontier thesis as uniquely and homogeneously American and has lead some contemporary critics to call for the inclusion of Cather's literary Plains place in a late twentieth-century multi-cultural canon of American literature. However, it is argued here that from a historical perspective of inter- and trans-culturality, Cather's prairie landscape contains a significant strain of 'imperialist nostalgia' that raises important questions about the viability of a multi-cultural reading.

If Cather's literary geography represents a common agrarian vision of the prairies, then the next chapter demonstrates how Kroetsch's prairie poems 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'Seed Catalogue' undertake a genealogical un hiding of what this vision conceals. Through a process of literary archaeology, the note-taking poet uncovers local particulars that reveal gaps in and fragment the old meta-narratives as well as count the cost and consequences of the imperial-colonial transfers upon which they were premised. Conceived of as material artefacts, the poems interrogate and displace linear, unified, and closed meta-narratives such as the prairies as a creation

out of nothing. What emerges instead is a history of place characterised by, on the one hand, absences, loss, and erasure and, on the other, presence, finding, and inscription. It is from having to map/write from within this dialogic and unstable in-between that the poetic voice realises that no straightforward emplacement is possible following displacement. Just as a pull towards a unified, enclosed, and affective sense of place continues to make itself felt in 'the other garden' – an inhabited, vernacular prairie place – and the spectre of an imperial Edenic garden, so the poet archaeologist must also come to terms with the not knowing that his genealogy of place reveals. It is by tracing the palimpsest flight of these lines of inquiry that we can see how Kroetsch's textual artefacts link local and regional particulars to historical transnational and -continental movements that operate below and beyond the levels of region and nation. In stark contrast to the old meta-narratives, Kroetsch's unfixed, unenclosed, and incomplete literary geography allows only low and paradoxical levels of local, regional, and national identity formation.

In chapter four we see how Heat-Moon follows in Kroetsch's archaeological footsteps when deep mapping Chase County, Kansas. By immersing himself in and going slowly over the ground of a remote rural county at the geographical centre of America, he performs a mapping that is at once centring and decentring. His unearthing of 'shards' reveals the cost to a local Plains place of nation and empire building and enables a critical interrogation of the cartographic grid, an emblem of regional and national place-making as visual, rational, and progressive (16). The creative variations on mapping that ensue counter, as we shall see, a culturally dominant story of 'progressive civilisation', which, in the author's analysis, is really declensionist because it occludes, extracts and exploits to the point of extinction and alienation (83). By contrast, mapping bodily and textually along the land's horizontal

and vertical axes unhides a historicist post-frontier prairie characterised by transgressions and regressions and ‘transit and translation’ (103). Heat-Moon’s spatial imaginary does not only have a historical dimension, however, advocating ‘participatory history’ in the hope that people might reattach themselves to and revalue place in an environmentally sustainable manner. In addition to reversing and displacing a linearly progressive meta-narrative with a multi-storied and –dimensional ‘deep landscape’, the hybrid neo-primitivism of Heat-Moon’s dreamtime cartography also has a potentially controversial spiritual dimension, which displays signs of an essentialising mysticism and a romanticised view of Indians (246). His literary geography threatens, in other words, to reproduce that which it seeks to deconstruct.

Before proceeding, I want to insert a conceptual note on the use of the terms space and place in this study. In the Western philosophical and scientific tradition of Descartes and Euclid, space is conceived as abstract, empty, and homogenous in contrast to place’s concrete, inhabited, and heterogeneous qualities. The result, as Edward Casey documents in *The Fate of Place* (1998), has been the consumption of place by space due, in particular, to a ‘transcendental deduction of place’ that presupposes ‘*empty space*’ and ‘fails to capture what is specific to place, namely, the capacity to hold and situate things, to give them a local habitation.’<sup>6</sup> In his attempt to rediscover place, Casey turns his attention to the work of phenomenologists and post-structuralists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Gaston Bachelard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Derrida. By tracing the genealogy of space and place as it unfolds in the writing of these thinkers, Casey makes the important discovery that ‘[t]he beguiling and bedevilling dichotomy between them’ is overcome.<sup>7</sup> Quoting Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927), Casey announces that in the second half of the twentieth century ‘space has been split up into



places' and that 'spaces come from places, not the other way around'.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, we can see in the work of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre how space and place both as concepts and in practice are interrelated and the boundaries between them unstable. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), for example, de Certeau understands space as practiced place while Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974) emphasises how abstract space is socially and ideologically productive.

Following Casey, de Certeau, and Lefebvre, space and place are not treated as monolithic and fixed categories in this thesis either. Rather than understanding them as dichotomous absolutes, they are understood as productive categories subject to and products of history and its vicissitudes. Hence, it is by paying careful attention to the dialogics and polyvalence of the terms that the events, conflicts, and disputes that shape the spaces/places we inhabit become visible.<sup>9</sup> It is, in other words, in the push and pull between constructs such as space, place, map, and landscape that they exert explanatory, critical, and imaginative power and allow us to begin to understand and situate literary place-making in a wider cultural and historical context. According to Casey,

[t]he new bases of any putative primacy of place are themselves multiple: bodily certainly, but also physical, nomadological, architectural, institutional, and sexual. Since there is no single basis of the primacy of place, there is no monolithic foundation in which this primacy could be built. What is at stake is a polyvalent primacy – an equiprimordiality of primary terms.'<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Towards a Literary Geography of the Great Plains: tropes, narratives, discourse

### *Creation Out of Nothing*

In the introduction to her historical survey of Great Plains fiction, *The Nature of the Place* (1995), Diane Dufva Quantic presents a list of images and phrases that have commonly been used to represent the region:

the Garden of the World, the Great American Desert, the closed frontier, Manifest Destiny, the safety valve, democratic utopia; wagon trains crawling west; explorers mapping rivers and mountains; Indians attacking, then fleeing, the settlers' encroachment; Cooper's Natty Bumppo, looming larger than life over Ishmael Bush's immigrant train; Cather's plow against the setting sun.<sup>1</sup>

Like her study of the region's literature more generally, Quantic's list is telling both in what it includes and what it leaves out. The images and phrases outline a culturally-specific story of the Plains as a space and a place. It is suggested that the beginning of this story was first given fictional form in James Fennimore-Cooper's 1827 novel *The Prairie*, which describes the meeting between the immigrant Bushes and Cooper's noble savage and wilderness resident, Natty Bumppo. Secondly, the extract also indicates that the story was recounted in full almost a century later in what has since become Willa Cather's canonical prairie trilogy, *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), and *A Lost Lady* (1923).<sup>2</sup> Put briefly, the story in question recounts the spread of Western civilisation onto the continent's central grasslands, the opening and closing of the American frontier. Among its key elements are acts of discovery,

exploration, conflict, immigration, and settlement. When given narrative form, these elements may be said to amount to a myth of cosmogenesis, that is, a culturally prominent and founding narrative that explains how space became place or, as Quantic's list suggests, how desert was transformed into garden. The impression that this story also figures centrally in Quantic's enquiry is reinforced shortly afterwards when she writes that

[i]n this study I explore the various manifestations of the myth of westward expansion in Great Plains fiction and the transformation of the assumptions implicit in the mythic images that became necessary when the land was claimed, communities were formed, and life began in real time.<sup>3</sup>

Quantic rightly identifies the westward expansion of Euro-American civilisation as a central theme in Plains fiction. Moreover, she also states that to make and inhabit place 'mythic images' are 'necessary'. In making the latter assertion, however, the extract does not just allude to but effectively perpetuates a problematic assumption of the narrative in question, namely that the land was unclaimed, without communities and existing in 'unreal time' before it was discovered, explored, and settled. By leaving unquestioned an a-historical and mythical void which is both place-making and place-erasing in fictions of the Great Plains, Quantic's literary criticism ends up replicating problematic assumptions of the myths that it purports to interrogate.

This marks a significant first observation in the context of this study because conceiving of and representing the prairies as a placeless void – wilderness and desert – is a key manoeuvre in making space for and legitimising Western settlement both

in- and outside literature. We see it happening, for example, when Willa Cather writes at the beginning of *My Ántonia* that '[t]here was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land – slightly undulating...' (MA, 8).

On one level this manoeuvre is informed by a logic reasoning that if land is perceived and conceived as a shapeless and uninhabited void, then it belongs to no one and is therefore available for occupation and territorialisation. It follows that in so far as the void is not an utter no-place but potentially placeful, it becomes the space from which desert and wilderness can be transformed into landscape and garden. What we are witnessing then is what Edward Casey describes as an act of 'cosmogenesis' in his seminal study of the philosophical history of space and place in Western culture, *The Fate of Place*. In origin stories of this type, he explains, '[t]o create "in the first place" is to create a *first place*...it is evident that narrative accounts of creation must bear on place even as they rely on time and language.'<sup>4</sup> Numerous Plains novels bear on place in this way, for example Cather's *O Pioneers!*, Frederick Grove's *Fruits of the Earth* (1933), and Ole E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927). In doing so, it might be suggested that the texts 'amount to public rituals re-enacting cosmogenesis'.<sup>5</sup> The most striking example is perhaps found in *O Pioneers!* when Alexandra Bergson transforms prairie wilderness into agrarian landscape, but we also experience the ritual enacted by Grove's protagonist, Abe Spalding, who 'wanted land, not landscape; all the landscape he cared for he would introduce himself.'<sup>6</sup>

If the void provides a pragmatic argument for settlement, then 'the prospect of a strict void, of an utter no-place' also, according to Casey, provides existential and cultural motivation for cosmogenesis. This may help explain why agrarian settlers in prairie literature recurrently perceive of the place as an unbounded space lacking the

landmarks that define place in a Euro-American sense. Repeatedly, they are portrayed as facing the ‘existential predicament of place-bereft individuals’. Their dilemma is ‘one of place-panic’ since the prospect of a strict void is felt to be intolerable and hence avoided at almost any cost.<sup>7</sup> To avoid derangement and madness, attempts are therefore made to enclose and thus make meaningful this unbounded and alien space. The most common strategy of domestication is to overlay the perceived void with familiar spatial images and metaphors. Of Alexandra Bergson’s mother in *O Pioneers!* we are told, for example, that ‘were [she] cast upon a desert island, she would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden, and find something to preserve’ (OP, 29). In a similar manner, we learn of Per Hansa’s first ploughing in *Giants in the Earth* that ‘he began to cut the sod on one side of the breaking into strips that could be handled. This was to be his building material [...] Field for planting on the one hand, sods for a house on the other – that was the way to plough.’<sup>8</sup>

By explicating the cultural specificity and significance of cosmogenesis in this way, we can begin to see how the mythical void functions as ‘a scene of *emerging order*’ in the literary making of the Plains.<sup>9</sup> As alluded to by Quantic when she writes about land claims, community formation, and life in real time, the void legitimises settlement by relegating the pre-settlement landscape to pre-history. In doing so, it also obscures and marginalizes significant elements of it, for example, the region’s indigenous biome, Native American artefacts and the notions of landscape, community, and nature that they embody. In other words, this type of mythic place-making comes at significant costs which its prominent literary images often do not account for. At the same time, however, the void also creates a space – wilderness and desert – that is potentially placeful and instrumental to the achievement of ‘the assurance offered by plenitude of place’.<sup>10</sup> Thus, we can see how the above account of

Euro-American settlement on the Plains constitutes a culturally specific myth that is also mythicising. It tells a story of how a place came to be, but in telling this story it also obscures and erases important elements of the landscape that was already in place.

*An Emerging Order: pastoral and progressive impulses in the Plains landscape*

As Quantic's list of images and phrases indicates, the place that emerges out of the prairie void is 'the Garden of the World'. Even though the transformation from desert to garden features prominently in Plains fiction, this narrative is not merely of regional import. In her essay 'Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative', Carolyn Merchant argues persuasively that it constitutes an overarching meta-narrative in the wider cultural imagining and shaping of the American continent:

Indeed, the story of Western civilisation since the seventeenth century and its advent on the American continent can be conceptualised as a grand narrative of fall and recovery [...] The controlling image of Enlightenment is the transformation from desert wilderness to cultivated garden. This complex of Christian, Greco-Roman, and Enlightenment components touched and reinforced each other at critical nodal points. As a powerful narrative, the idea of recovery functioned as ideology and legitimation for settlement of the New World, while capitalism and, science and technology provided the means of transforming the material world.<sup>11</sup>

In her essay, Merchant demonstrates, furthermore, how this culturally dominant narrative has taught readers, viewers, and listeners to understand North America's

spatial history in terms of progressive recovery through its dissemination in a wide range of media including fiction, film, painting, and political speeches.

In addition to the idyllic agrarian gardens of *Ántonia* Shimerda and Alexandra Bergson in *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, we also find variations on the recovery narrative in a number of other Plains novels published in the first decades of the twentieth century. Among them we may count Marie Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1920), Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, Frederick Groves' *Fruits of the Earth*, and Marie Sandoz' *Old Jules* (1935). In spite of the 'immense and utter loneliness' that Grove's protagonist Abe Spalding feels on the untilled prairie, he is adamant that he can conquer the 'spirit' of the land.<sup>12</sup> His most direct means of conquest is the imposition of a spatial order on the ground that is of obvious symbolic significance. It is, we are told, with a feeling of 'ploughing over an appreciable fraction of the curvature of the globe' that he transforms land into landscape, thus alluding not only to the traditional design of old-world agrarian landscapes but also to modern instruments of spatial production such as cartography and the steel plough.<sup>13</sup>

In his study of Canadian prairie fiction, *Unnamed Country* (1977), Dick Harrison puts forward the argument that Ralph Connor's *The Sky Pilot* (1899) 'can be taken as the beginning of a trend toward a garden view of the prairie which was to last for over twenty-five years.' Of writers like Connor and Arthur Stringer who voice 'lyric praise of farm life', Harrison comments that '[l]ike Eden, their West has no past, only a present beginning when the settler arrives, and a better future', before adding that '[t]his was, of course, a time of boom and optimism and, for the writers at least, a time of agrarian ideals.'<sup>14</sup> Even though the novels by Cather, Rølvaag, Grove, and Sandoz do not represent the realisation of agrarian ideals as straightforwardly progressive, the presence of placial cosmogenesis and recovery nonetheless indicate

that they adhere to such ideals at a cultural level. That is to say, the texts contribute to a discursive construction of the Great Plains as a regional and national garden in ways that are at once edenic and modern. In the words of Ántonia Shimerda in Cather's novel, they 'help make this land one good farm' (MA, 141).

Realising the 'agrarian ideals' that Harrison identifies requires the transformation of a material world. As Cather, Grove, and Rølvaag's novels suggest, this world is made up of land in its natural state. It is either perceived as an 'original Eve' that 'is pristine and barren, but has the potential for development' or a 'fallen Eve' where 'nature is disorderly and chaotic; a wilderness, wasteland, or desert requiring improvement'.<sup>15</sup> In the novels it is possible to trace the improvement of land in its natural state by looking at the way they depict the operations of technology, science, and the market. The key technological emblem and instrument is perhaps the steel plough as it is found in the scenes from *Giants in the Earth* and *Fruits of the Earth*. But equally, we also find the plough 'left standing in the field' writing against a sinking sun in *My Ántonia* and having worked the soil in 'Prairie Spring', the poetic prelude to *O Pioneers!*: 'miles of fresh-plowed soil,/ Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness' (MA, 245). Other examples of the progressive potential of technology include the introduction of new kinds of seeds and crops and, a silo in Cather's *O Pioneers!* (OP, 64). Moreover, it is also in the context of this progressive narrative of the prairie landscape as a technologically-assisted creation out of nothing that Robert Kroetsch's deploys a historical seed catalogue as the focal material and creative reference point for an interrogation of it in the poem 'Seed Catalogue'.

Commonly in Euro-American stories of how the West was settled, these technological instruments are linked to scientific discoveries and advances. Illuminating cases in point are Renaissance and Enlightenment developments in the



fields of geometry and cartography. As Denis Cosgrove reminds us, the cartographic grid 'harks back to Ptolemy's map and the spatial organisation of renaissance perspective'.<sup>16</sup> This cartographic grid of course played a central role in the creation of a Midwestern agrarian landscape at a conceptual, applied, and ideological level. As John Stilgoe explains in his study of America's common landscape, the linear lines of the grid 'objectify the Enlightenment in America. Late in the eighteenth century they existed only in surveyors' notebooks and on the rough maps carefully stored in federal land office drawers [...] the lines existed only as invisible guides.' However, the grid was not to be restricted to the conceptual spheres of surveying and geo-politics for long as Stilgoe's account demonstrates: 'By 1820 the grid concept was permanently established in the national imagination, and westward-moving adventurers understood its characteristics.' Again, far from being confined to the mental realms of the conceptual or imagined, Stilgoe shows in a chapter entitled 'The Grid' how its lines were applied on the ground. In a technological sense, the grid was instrumental to the spatial organisation, sale, and settlement of western lands during the first half of the nineteenth century. During the process, it ironically became so widespread as to seem commonplace and natural, and hence, in a paradoxical twist, became increasingly invisible. According to Stilgoe, '[b]y the 1860s the grid objectified national, not regional, order, and no one wondered at the rural space marked by urban rectilinearity.'<sup>17</sup>

Along with surveys of the lands, peoples, flora, and fauna of the West such as the one undertaken by the Lewis and Clarke expedition in 1804-1806, cartographic surveying thus formed a key component of Thomas Jefferson's vision of transforming a largely unknown western wilderness into a democratic agrarian garden inhabited by yeoman homesteaders. In a representational as well as an instrumental sense, the grid

is exemplary of what Patricia Limerick has called 'rationality in action'.<sup>18</sup> In support of this analysis Stilgoe describes Jefferson's 1785 report on how the young nation's backlands might best be surveyed as 'a model example of Enlightenment abstraction, a perfect scheme for ordering a wilderness *tabla rasa*.'<sup>19</sup> This type of rational place-making in the name of progress is not without its problems however. It performs a voiding akin to the mythical one described earlier. The '*tabla rasa*' does not simply signal a barren and empty void or wilderness, it is also emblematic of modern space. According to the laws of Euclidean geometry, modern space, like a *tabula rasa*, is planiform, empty, and of infinite extension, 'typified in its postulate of parallel lines that never meet'.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, cartography contributes to a voiding of the landscape on the ground because it abstracts inhabited place into a blank space that can be filled with sites fixed along longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates.

On a more practical note, cartographic surveying was also instrumental to the commodification of land. It allowed the lands of Western America to be divided neatly but indiscriminately into 160 acres plots which could be bought and sold. In turning land into property in this way, the grid provided the newly independent American government with a much needed source of revenue in the short term. In the long term, it crucially provided a spatial template to support the establishment of a market economy that would encourage investment and enterprise, and facilitate the efficient exchange of products between the markets of the Midwest and the rest of the world. Both grid and market thus appear to be rational plot lines in a story of progressive recovery. But just as the property market encouraged speculation, so the prospects offered by the westward advance stirred not only reason, courage, and collaboration but also greed, envy, and cruelty in and amongst its motley array of actors. Because of the caveat that the latter represent, the modern recovery narrative

is, as suggested by new western historians such as Patricia Limerick and more recently Stephanie LeMenager, best described as a fiction or myth, albeit a very powerful and persistent one.<sup>21</sup>

As plough, grid, and property illustrate, technology, science, and the market constitute nodal points that touch, entangle, and overlap in the formation of an overarching narrative of progressive place-making at regional as well as national level. In political and literary discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, they exemplify the way ‘wild’ land is laid over with tropes signalling development and improvement. The imagined end point of this process is ‘the garden of the world’, an image that does not just refer to an enclosed domestic or Edenic space but also to an agrarian landscape with recourse to the dual logos of religion and science. In John Gast’s landscape painting *American Progress* (1872, fig. 1), we find this kind of idealised symbolic place-making embodied in a female America figure who

carries telegraph wires in her left hand, symbols of the highest order of communication – language borne through the air, the word or logos from above. The domination of logic or pure form is repeated in the book grasped in her right hand touching the coiled telegraph wires. She represents the city, the civil, the civic order of government – the highest order of nature. She is pure Platonic form impressed on female matter, transforming and ordering all beneath her.<sup>22</sup>

### *Landscape Prospects: visual logic and social formation*

When explicating the formation of a discourse that represents the shaping of the American continent in terms of recovery, it is instructive to view ‘the garden of the world’ not just as a modern agrarian landscape, but also as a landscape in the sense of

a visual construct. As ways of seeing, the influence of cartography and the painterly landscape is felt not just in visual but also textual media. Both are linked to the Renaissance discovery of Euclidean geometry and central perspective, in particular Leon Battista Alberti's development of the 'costruzione legittima' in his *Della Pittura* (1436).<sup>23</sup> From a vantage point, landscape prospects organise space and its chorological elements along the lines of central perspective as they run from the observer's eye through fore-, middle, and background towards a vanishing point. This way of seeing in turn creates 'the realist illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface'.<sup>24</sup> To Renaissance scholars such as Alberti, perspective did not simply create a sensory illusion, however. It 'was regarded not merely as a technique, a visual device, but as a truth itself, the discovery of an objective property of space rather than solely of vision.'<sup>25</sup> Based on such findings, Kenneth Clark argues in *Landscape and Art* (1949) that a realist landscape genre that 'attempts faithfully to record the forms of the external world for their own sake, appeared for the first time in fifteenth-century Flanders and northern Italy.'<sup>26</sup>

It is exactly because it pre-supposes objectivity and realism that this landscape aesthetics objectifies and naturalises a culturally specific way of seeing and ordering space and place. Despite the assumed non-ideological status of realist art – they record 'for their own sake' as Clarke notes – landscape prospects are evidently ideological vehicles. In addition to embodying certain ideals as to what constitutes beauty, their visual language also articulates a belief in and the value of, for example, rational spatial planning, control and representation, as well as private land ownership. In Denis Cosgrove's analysis, landscape in painting and garden design

achieved visually and ideologically what survey, map making and ordnance charting achieved practically: the control and domination over space as an absolute, objective entity, its transformation into the property of an individual or a state. And landscape achieved these ends by use of the same techniques as the practical sciences, principally by applying Euclidean geometry as the guarantor of certainty in spatial conception, organization and representation.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of prairie art and literature, this visual dimension features prominently. Landscape prospects depicting agrarian scenes mimetically with clear lines of demarcation between farm buildings, orchard, arable fields, meadows, and the surrounding sea of grass are commonplace. On a small and modest domestic scale, we find an exemplary depiction of this type of landscape in Sallie Cover's *Homestead of Ellsworth L. Ball* (circa 1880-90, fig. 2). On a regional and national scale, the story of this landscape is retold in Frances Palmer's *Across the Continent 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way'* (1868, fig. 3).<sup>28</sup> From a vantage point this painting offers the observer a panoramic view of an unfolding story of continental progress. Its different components such as the train, the public school, and pioneers clearing and breaking land signal landscaping based on technological, corporate, and educational advances. In turn, these progressive motifs are set against an open plain promising further horizontal expansion along the linear conduits of railway tracks and telegraph wires that mark the transformation of un-inscribed space into developed demarcated place. Meanwhile, as this drama of modern place-making unfolds, two pre-settlement Indians on horseback are tellingly about to vanish in the smoke left behind by the advancing train.

More than most other landscape paintings from this period, Palmer's carefully crafted allegory of continental progress may serve as an example of how a particular visual mode of representation had a direct bearing on a wider cultural discourse on space and place. As Stephen Daniels has noted, it was largely due to streamlining of production processes and access to a nationwide distribution network that print publishers such as Currier and Ives were able to mass produce and circulate images that deploy a 'rhetoric of continental conquest'. Covering a range of media including illustrated maps, guidebooks, cigar labels, sheet music, and quilts, landscapes such as Palmer's reached mass audiences across the public and private spheres, including 'the parlours of many private dwellings [...] schools [...], offices, banks, bar-rooms, barbershops, boarding houses and hotels.'<sup>29</sup> Like the iconic depictions of the course of American empire by artists such as Thomas Cole, John Gast, and Emmanuel Leutze, landscape prospects such as Palmer's contributed to the formation of a progressive spatial discourse and expansionist ideology that was central to the imagining of a national American community. In his study of American landscape painting, Wolfgang Born succinctly summarizes, as well as perpetuates, this nineteenth century visual articulation of a mythic American sense of place. In Born's words, 'Americans began to see their country as the continent really is, an immense stretch of land over which the imagination could wander unrestrictedly.'<sup>30</sup>

In light of these observations on landscape as a visual and ideological construct, it no longer seems a co-incidence – when we turn our attention back to fiction – that the area Alexandra Bergson and the other pioneers transform into landscape in *O Pioneers!* is called 'the Divide'. Nor is it surprising that we find Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* surveying the Nebraskan 'high country' and recording how the 'old pasture land was now being broken into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was

disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing. There were wooden houses where the old sod dwellings used to be, and little orchards, and big red barns' (MA, 306). This spur of realist art in Cather's literary landscapes does not just depict a distinct socio-cultural form of spatial organisation, it is also aesthetically pleasing as suggested by Jim Burden's assessment of it as 'beautiful and harmonious' (MA, 306). In an idealist fashion reminiscent of Palmer's continental landscape, Burden compares the transformation of the prairie from inchoate land into landscape to 'the growth of a great man or of a great idea' (MA, 306).

Each of the landscape paintings discussed above illustrates the transposition onto the Plains of old-world forms of spatial organisation according to Euro-American aesthetic conventions and traditions. Contrary to Born's claim that the imagination wanders unrestrictedly, they demonstrate that it is clearly bound by culturally specific spatial and visual constraints. Repeatedly, the scenes have the double meaning of prospect as pleasing view and future promise encoded. Like the cartographic map, they may be said to project what the artist and reader/viewer would like to see rather than depict what was found or took place on the ground. In this sense the 'realist' landscape like maps may be described as 'a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent [...] It had become a real instrument to concretise projections on the earth's surface.'<sup>31</sup> From a discursive point of view, we can say therefore that grid and landscape whether worded or painted do not merely give face to the Plains region. They also influence how it is seen, understood, and inhabited at the same time that they represent significant elements of the pre- as well as post-settlement landscape out of existence. Technically, this is achieved by depicting a geography that lacks elevation from a vantage point and according to a way of seeing afforded principally by central perspective.

In his wide-ranging analysis of the historical production of space in Western culture, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that such landscapes promote the primacy of the gaze and are informed by a 'logic of visualization'. This logic operates, firstly, through a metaphorical dependence on the written word and, secondly, through a metonymic process of spectacularisation:

In the course of the process whereby the visual gains the upper hand over the other senses, all impressions derived from taste, smell, touch and even hearing first lose their clarity, then fade away altogether, leaving the field to line, colour and light. In this way a part of the object and what it offers comes to be taken for the whole.<sup>32</sup>

As to how the conflation of 'an empty Euclidean geometric space that is unaffected by whatever may fill it and a visual space with well-defined optical properties', that is, a landscape painting, came about, Lefebvre explains that

[t]he thesis of an inert spatial medium where people and things, actions and situations, merely take up their abode, as it were, corresponds to the Cartesian model (conceiving of things in their extension as the 'object' of thought) which over time became the stuff of 'common sense' and 'culture'. A picture of mental space developed by the philosophers and epistemologists thus became a transparent zone, a logical medium.<sup>33</sup>

In Lefebvre's analysis of space as a social product, one of the problems with the common-sensical and seemingly transparent visual logic of grid and landscape is that



it displaces and reduces natural and social space ‘as it gains the upper hand’. As we shall see, a key line of inquiry in the chapters that follow is the relationship between the type of visual logic that grid and landscape represent and the progressive recovery narrative. In particular, I explore this relationship by closely examining landscape and grid as both literary and visual motifs in *O Pioneers!*, ‘Seed Catalogue’, and *PrairieErth*.

Through an explication of visual and ideological aspects of landscape, I have illustrated that whether painted, worded, or physical it constitutes a complex and revealing ‘cultural expression of social relations with the land’.<sup>34</sup> It objectifies a culturally specific mode of organising, controlling, and representing space that is in part rational, visual, agrarian, and values land as private property. The geometry of central perspective and the ‘construzione legittima’ lend to landscape a seeming directness and objectivity of representation. As a prospect from a vantage point, it signifies spatial control as well as future promise and progress. In a Plains context, it is telling therefore that nineteenth century congressmen ‘[i]n speech after speech [...] likened their land-planning work to painting, to the making of a visual image’. According to John Stilgoe, ‘[s]uch visual analogies suggest that the Congress understood its work in visual as well as political terms, and that very often – as a rare Congressman was bold enough to remark – the visual implications of the amendments totally escaped them.’<sup>35</sup> One important implication, as I have made clear above, is that the congressmen did not simply practice visual politics, they also made visual modes of spatial representation materially and ideologically influential. It is finally for this reason that I argue with Denis Cosgrove that America and the Great Plains ‘is in some respects an articulation on a continental scale of the landscape idea’.<sup>36</sup>

### *Troping a Domestic Empire*

As subplots of an overarching progressive recovery narrative, plough, grid, and landscape illustrate how the myth of the garden in its agrarian, edenic, and pastoral inflections has worked its way into a national imagination and contributed to a spatial discourse that has shaped the Great Plains in significant ways. As literary tropes garden, grid, and landscape are symbolic of and instrumental to the production of a social space and a progressive ideology that seeks to legitimise the construction of a modern regional and national landscape on land that it perceives as blank, empty, or virgin. It is this aspect of Euro-American settlement in the West that Annette Kolodny explores in the *Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975). In particular, Kolodny examines the complex interrelations between cultural perception, social construction, and linguistic transformation in the pioneer period of American history. Drawing on a wide range of historical sources from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, including diaries and novels, she demonstrates that the success of the pioneers depended on mastering land on the ground and at the same time in language, especially through ‘the continued repetition of the land-as-woman symbolization in American life and letters’.<sup>37</sup>

In Kolodny’s feminist reading, the dual notion of land as an object of domination and maternal garden is not a ‘mere literary convention...’ It exists as an aspiration in writing and in daily experience because ‘an irrefutable fact of history (the European discovery of America) touched every word written about the New World with the possibility that the ideally beautiful and bountiful terrain might be lifted forever out of the canon of pastoral convention and invested with the reality of daily experience.’ On this idealising strand in American life and letters, Kolodny makes the prescient comment that ‘only if we acknowledge the power of the pastoral

impulse to shape and structure experience can we reconcile the images of abundance in the early texts with the historical evidence of starvation, poor harvests and inclement weather.’<sup>38</sup>

In the literary making of the Plains, the pastoral impulse is related to a process of domestication that Amy Kaplan analyses in her study of the making of an American empire at home and abroad, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002). In a chapter entitled ‘Manifest Domesticity’, Kaplan, like Kolodny, seeks to explain the process of domestication that was played out in Western America during the nineteenth century. To do so, she operates with the ‘the double meaning of “domestic” as both the space of the nation and of the familial household and shows how these notions are inextricably intertwined with shifting notions of foreign.’<sup>39</sup> According to Kaplan, female domesticity and male Manifest Destiny are interrelated in so far as they both contribute to the imagining of the nation as home while trying to contain anarchic and ‘unheimlich’ outside forces that threaten to destabilise it. In a series of readings of women’s novels from the 1850s such as E.D.E.N Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand* (1859), Kaplan demonstrates ‘how the representation of domesticity and female subjectivity simultaneously contributed to and were enabled by narratives of nation and empire building.’<sup>40</sup>

Following Kolodny and Kaplan, this study turns to literary texts to examine the influence of a domesticating pastoral impulse on the representation of a regional place that is part of wider imperial and national landscape. It does so most explicitly in the chapter on *O Pioneers!*, a text in which it is possible to identify an idealising pastoral impulse in the agrarian landscape garden that marks the apex of an imperial-colonial recovery narrative. From a spatial point of view, it is shown how undomesticated land and pre-settlement cultures are depicted in the novel as foreign

in the sense suggested by Kaplan. Moreover, it is also suggested that in the context of the post-frontier America in which the novel was first published, the pastoral impulse may be said to constitute a type of imperial nostalgia.

### *The Plains as an Imperial-colonial Landscape*

As Kaplan demonstrates, the westward expansion of the US was an imperial and colonial undertaking on several levels. Since it forms part of the American West historically, it is not surprising that the same can be said of the Great Plains and the literary representations of the region studied here. In so far as Merchant is right in suggesting that the dominant recovery narrative brings together 'Christian, Greco-Roman, and Enlightenment components', a case can be made for the Plains landscape as imperial-colonial. The voiding of the pre-settlement landscape through tropes of barrenness, emptiness, and virginity makes space for and legitimises the transfer of European and Euro-American modes of spatial organisation and representation. As for the idea of recovery, it is a Christian component which features prominently in one of the founding texts of Western culture. In the Book of Genesis it takes the form of a creation of out of nothing, whereas after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden it involves the improvement of a fallen nature. In a similar manner, we can trace the influence of both the meta-narrative structure and pastoralism of the Roman writer Virgil's eclogues in *O Pioneers!*. Just as the transformation of wilderness into landscape in the novel is reminiscent of the development of nature into nation in the eclogues, so its overall narrative structure resembles Virgil's cyclical depiction of the rise and fall of the Roman empire. As far as Enlightenment components are concerned, I have previously discussed the grid, a figure I shall return to in more detail during my discussion of Heat-Moon's *PrairieEarth* in which it features as an emblem of progress and purportedly rational place-making.

If we add to these components the role landscape prospects and impressionism play in shaping the Plains in the texts studied here, we can reasonably talk of imperialism in an aesthetic as well as a geo-political sense. The former complements the latter by seeing place through and representing it in accordance with European and Euro-American artistic practices and cultural traditions. Understood in this way, imperialism does not 'refer to explicit political, economic, and military projects aimed at conquest and domination', but, as John Wiley explains

a way of thinking, a complex set of attitudes which, through their expression and reproduction in art, literature, science, academic writing, media and so on, work to perpetuate European and latterly Western perceptions of superiority over other cultures, belief in their right to govern, and faith that they are in possession of essential truths and insights.<sup>41</sup>

We can thus see how representational practices not just contribute to and reflect ideologies and discourses that are imperial and colonial, but also help legitimise activities on the ground. In an essay on how such intercultural and intertextual transfers impact on the work of Canadian writers, Robert Kroetsch comments that his

particular predicament is that he works with a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own, and not a borrowing. But just as there was in the Latin word a concealed Greek experience, so there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American.<sup>42</sup>

In comparison to the American Plains, the nineteenth century settlement of the Canadian West may be said to have been colonial in the more traditional sense of a European nation attempting to transfer its political, social, economic, religious, legal, and military systems and practices onto a foreign land. Legally, for example, Canada remained a British colony even after being awarded the status of a self-governing dominion with the passing of the British North American Act in 1867. As for the Plains, the eminent symbol of the peaceful presence of British law and order as opposed to an American style Wild West became the Mounted Police. It is against this more immediate colonial backdrop that Northrop Frye tells Canadian poets like Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Atwood

to be anti-colonial. We are a nation made of the waste of the narrative of empire, a nation made of wars won and lost, of peace treaties and their humiliations and their prophecies, of retreating people tempted to glorify their retreat, of the acquisitions of land and resources under the guise of pastoral utopias.<sup>43</sup>

The notion of a nation made out of the 'waste' of imperial narratives rather than from a mythical void or a ground zero marks a significant difference between Canadian and American literary geographies of the Plains and the West more generally. In Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), and Kroetsch's novels and long poems such as *Gone Indian* (1973) and 'The Ledger' (1973), Canada is a nation lacking a founding narrative. Instead, it is made up of the fragments of the stories of others and lacking a culturally dominant and unifying meta-narrative of its own. Importantly, it is by writing about

place from such a post-structural and transnational perspective that some Canadian writers have gained critical purchase on narrow regional and national identity discourses whether Canadian or American. It is, furthermore, due to this perspective that they are able to unhide elements of regional place-making from beneath 'the guise of pastoral utopias' that are, as we shall see, pre- as well as post-national.

In contrast to north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, the imperial advance south of the border happened under the aegis of a newly formed American nation of states. Having liberated itself from a colonial power, Britain, during a revolutionary War of Independence, the United States sought to expand across a continent of which parts either were or had been under the sovereignty, if not control, of different European powers. In 1803 the United States acquired the area now known as the Great Plains from France as part of the Louisiana Purchase. This purchase of a vast tract of land west of the Mississippi may be described as concurrently anti-colonial and imperial.

On the one hand, Thomas Jefferson's promotion of the prairie region as an agrarian landscape garden and a democratic utopia inhabited by yeomen farmers was anti- and post-colonial. This vision attempted to assert the power and sovereignty of a recently independent new-world nation in order to differentiate it from and enable it to compete with its old-world counterparts in the race for empire. On the other hand, the vision itself and the actions taken to realize it by the US government can also be construed as imperial.<sup>44</sup> When Jefferson commissioned Merriwether Lewis and William Clark to survey and map the newly acquired territory in 1804, he did so with a view to gaining geo-political control as well as enabling trade and settlement. In other words, mapping the geography, peoples, flora, and fauna of the continent's 'unknown' interior was instrumental to plotting the onward course of an American empire. Likewise it should be remembered that it was as part of this westward

movement that the cartographic grid came to function as both template and emblem of a rational geo-political order encompassing towns, counties, and states within a unified nation structure. Thus, in addition to being popularised as a romantic adventure in the wilderness, the imperial advance westward also involved the imposition of a spatial order informed by the political, scientific, and legal thinking of Enlightenment and Renaissance Europe.<sup>45</sup> The result in both cases was to provide a fledgling nation with a unifying narrative of its own becoming.

If we understand American empire and colonisation in these terms, we can then begin to appreciate Howard Lamar's comment that

the West was itself a colony, a regional empire of the East within which was to be found the internal empire of white settlers who made colonial dependents of the Indians. The quintessential American is in fact an urban product of a commercial and technological culture, and the frontier myth is the focus of nostalgia.<sup>46</sup>

The myths of wilderness, frontier and pastoral gardens may be nostalgic and romantic as opposed to contemporary and modern. But more so than in Canada's narrative of 'waste', they have proved powerful in fostering a symbolic, if historically inaccurate, understanding of the United States' imperial history and what it means to be an American. Even if 'the sinews of empire and nation were extremely thin and tenuous' on the prairies and remained so for large parts of the nineteenth century, these myths managed to gloss over such historical facts with considerable success.<sup>47</sup>

In their frontier versions of the overarching recovery narrative, J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Theodore Roosevelt all argue that



a unique American experience and character arose in the meeting between wilderness and civilisation. Just as Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) writes that '[h]ere individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men', so Turner writes a century later that the pioneer 'transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [...] Here is a new product that is American.'<sup>48</sup> In a literary context, a contemporary of Turner, Walt Whitman, also embraces this spirit when he proclaims that the American landscape is 'altogether our own, without a trace or taste of Europe's soil, reminiscence, technical letter or spirit.'<sup>49</sup>

By contrast, imagining and shaping the prairies through cartographic mapping, landscape paintings, and novels containing spatial images and structures borrowed from canonical Western texts suggest that rather than a unique American experience, old-world components figure centrally in the imperial-colonial advance onto the North American plains. Even though the region's gridded fields and grasslands are unlike any landscape found in Europe, they nonetheless bear traces of a spatial history that is distinctly Euro-American and -Canadian. For this reason, it is suggested here that the place itself challenges the unifying and homogenising myth of an exceptional American identity. The transformation of the lands of the West may commonly have been represented as uniquely American for political and ideological purposes, but from a historical point of view the landscape is more accurately conceived as the result of a complex series of movements, transfers, and borrowings across cultures and continents.

It should be noted, however, that these intercultural encounters were not restricted to the movements of governments and corporations. They also took place and continue to do so at the level of individual trappers, traders, missionaries, Indians, settlers, and artists. For this reason, we may usefully approach the Plains the way

Richard White conceives of the Great Lakes region, that is, as a 'middle ground', a place 'in between cultures, peoples, and empires' in which we see 'an odd imperialism and complicated world system'.<sup>50</sup> It is by adopting kindred post-regional and -national perspectives that Canadian writers and critics like Frye, Kroetsch, Ondaatje, Atwood, and Aritha Van Herk gain critical purchase on narrow regional and national identities. Kroetsch's early long poems, for example, not only tell the story of Euro-Canadian settlement on land previously inhabited by Cree and Blackfoot Indians. In addition to alluding to inter-Indian warfare, they also tell the story of how a relative of the poet returned to his grandmother's birthplace, Cologne, Germany, on a bombing raid during the Second World War. In the context of the poem, these 'forgotten' historical incidents serve as reminders that the Plains are not just a place of imperial transfers, but also returns and circulations. Moreover, the geographical palimpsest that results from these intercultural movements and conflicts also sheds light on the shifting power relations between the nations, cultures, and peoples that have occupied and acted in the zone of contact that is the prairies.

In making the case for post-regional and -national perspectives, it is important not to lose sight, as Lamar reminds us, of the fact that the story of North America's internal empires has been dominated by Euro-American powers and modes of representation. These, in turn, have had very real ramifications for non-Euro-American peoples, places, wildlife, and biome. It is these ramifications, moreover, that various versions of the meta-narrative of fall and recovery all too often fail to account for. I am thinking here of Plains fiction harbouring what Dick Harrison refers to as 'a garden view', but also the frontier theses of historians such as Turner and Roosevelt.<sup>51</sup> Like Western historians and critics such as Richard White, Patricia Limerick, Donald Worster, and more recently, Krista Comer and Stephanie

LeMenager, this study also seeks to identify counter sites and narratives in literary geographies that challenge culturally dominant myths such as those of the frontier, garden, and Manifest Destiny as ‘a set of spatial and representational conventions that normalized the United States’ expansionist project.’<sup>52</sup> In doing so, it pays particular attention to the ways in which in ‘the history of U.S. imperialism [...] colonialism and anticolonialism, nation-building and empire-building joined together in geographic dominion over Native Americans’, and, it might be added, the landscape they had previously inhabited.<sup>53</sup>

It is when approached from a spatial perspective as the one set out above that we can begin to see how the four texts studied here variously reproduce, resist, and dispute salient imperial and colonial influences that have shaped the lie of the Midwestern land. From the point of view of space and place, prairie fictions such as Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady* acknowledge and value old-world elements of the Westering experience on aesthetic and ideological grounds. Like numerous other texts harbouring a garden view, this practice can be explained with reference to the authors’ European background, predilections, and retentions. Their literary landscapes do not radically question or seek to displace the dominant narrative of progressive recovery and its ethnic and cultural Euro-centrism. Rather texts such as Cather’s prairie novels accommodate old-world transfers to create a variation on it even when they take issue with culturally dominant versions of the frontier story.

By contrast, writers like Kroetsch and Heat-Moon explore how Western modes of spatial production have represented salient elements of not just the pre-settlement but also the settler prairies out of existence. In doing so, their writing maintains an anti-colonial stance that seeks both to reveal the costs of and to deconstruct the myth of the frontier garden as a creation out of nothing. On a related

note, non-fictional eco-critical works such as Don Gayton's *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* (1990) and John Janovy's *Keith County Journal* (1978) and *Dunwoody Pond* (1994) also adopt spatial points of view from which the Great Plains can be viewed as an imperial-colonial landscape. By taking deep and layered views of local Plains habitats, these literary cartographies document how the region's gridded agrarian landscape is quite literally premised on the removal of native biome and aboriginal peoples and cultures. In addition, texts such as *PrairyErth* also describe how in a state of historical forgetfulness and myth-making, the dominant settler culture has subsequently re-told and re-enacted this story as one of 'progressive civilisation' in which Indians commonly feature as exotic tourist spectacle only.

#### *Progressivism and Pastoralism in the Twentieth Century*

Above I noted that the texts by Kroetsch and Heat-Moon are both written in response to a dominant meta-narrative of recovery. This serves as a timely reminder of how notions of progress and pastoralism are not restricted to nineteenth and early twentieth-century literature. Indeed, they have continued to exert considerable influence on the way the Great Plains region has been represented and imagined throughout the twentieth century. It can be argued that to both authors, garden, grid, and landscape are significant components of an always already spatial discourse that contemporary Plains writers are confronted with and must negotiate. In Robert Kroetsch's early prairie poetry, for example, the notion and rhetoric of a prairie garden as a creation out of nothing constitutes an obscuring and potentially paralysing spectral presence referred to in the poem 'The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise' as 'the pale garden/ chill as white' (CFN, 92). In the critical essay 'Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye' Kroetsch elaborates on the problems posed by the form

and content of the narratives, mainly novels, that were available to him as an emerging writer in the 1960s and 1970s:

I was, as that insistently young writer on the Canadian prairies, aware that the forms at my disposal had spoken their piece and were into a recitation of content and form that not only told me little, but that, further, concealed from me what it was I wanted to say.<sup>54</sup>

In twentieth century Plains fiction the 'recitation of content and form' variously inscribes the place with idealism (pastoralism, progressivism), disillusionment (desert, dust bowl), and nostalgia (pastoralism and progressivism revisited). Like Harrison and Kolodny, Kroetsch identifies an idealist strand in American letters and culture when he writes that '[s]ince Columbus and Cortés, the Americas have been caught in the Eden quest (be it for something that was lost or something that is to be found), and with it comes, always, the question of originality. *Originality*.'<sup>55</sup>

Despite the fact that even a cursory glance at the twentieth-century histories of Canada and the United States confirms that the representation of the Plains as pastoral or progressive has become obsolete for socio-economic, political, demographic, and ecological reasons, this mode of representation has nonetheless maintained its force as symbol and rhetorical trope. It continues to circulate as a type of common cultural currency in the world of politics, in the advertisements of the market place, and in the arts. John F. Kennedy, for example, accepted the Democratic nomination for president in Los Angeles in 1960 by urging Americans to build a new world in the same way that the '[t]he pioneers of old' had built 'a new world here in the West'. As Patricia Limerick has noted, it was to be expected at the time 'that both Kennedy and the

American public would find in “frontier” a simple and attractive metaphor for challenge, struggle, and mastery.’ Considering events of the intervening twenty-five years such as the actions of the American Indian Movement and oil and agricultural crises, it is all the more surprising to find a similar echo of nineteenth century imperial progressivism in Ronald Reagan’s second inaugural address:

A settler pushes west and sings his song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American sound: It is hopeful, bighearted, idealistic – daring, decent and fair. That’s our heritage, that’s our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old.<sup>56</sup>

At around the same time that Reagan re-applied the frontier gloss, one of the country’s corporate giants, General Motors, ran a nation-wide advertising campaign under the slogan ‘The Heartbeat of America’. Through the repeated use of pastoral images of life in rural America, this campaign sought to link GM vehicles to a Midwestern American heartland.<sup>57</sup> In what appears to be a revival of this strategy, the corporation has recently launched a campaign under the slogan ‘Our Country, Our Truck’. Once again the commercials feature idyllic images of rural, small-town America, this time accompanied by the voice of Midwestern songwriter and rock star John Mellencamp. As these examples from political and popular culture demonstrate, progressive and pastoral tropes are continually being recycled to produce an affective belonging to an imagined American community in Benedict Anderson’s sense.<sup>58</sup> Paradoxically, this sense of place is tinged simultaneously with a nostalgic longing for a lost idyll or heroic past and the prospect of a brighter future. By thus articulating a

reactionary hope of the recovery of a fallen, historical place that only ever existed as myth in the first place, it effectively perpetuates a cultural myth.

This idealising mode of representation is not confined to political and popular culture however. It also features prominently in the works of several writers represented in a recent Canadian anthology of agrarian Plains poetry, *Following the Plough: Recovering the Rural* (2000). In her review of the collection Suzanne Stewart notes how

[m]any of the works associate rural life with an idyllic past – “faraway days,” which exist only in the memory (12), or an “Eden,” a “garden” that “did not fall” (30) – which, given the fragility of contemporary rural society, seems to be naively nostalgic. Lacking, for the most part, a contemporary thrust...<sup>59</sup>

In *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993) Kathleen Norris traces a similar nostalgic sentiment in the way some residents of Lemmon, South Dakota continue to cling on to the progressive dream. Despite living in a place that has experienced decades of decline in terms of population, farms, businesses, and relative wealth, one woman is reported to have told her in 1984 that ‘[y]ou don’t know what it was like here twenty years ago. That’s what we want; that’s what we have to get back to.’ According to Norris, it is only by disregarding events of 1964 such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the struggle over the Civil Rights Act, and the Vietnam war that the woman is able to imagine that ‘paradise existed in a little Dakota town, where it seemed that the dreams of progress held by the homesteaders and early merchants were at last being realized.’ To paraphrase Kolodny’s observation on the power of the pastoral,

one might say that it is only if we acknowledge the power of the progressive myth that one can reconcile depopulation, foreclosures, and bankruptcies with a vision of northwest South Dakota as prospering and progressive. It is interesting to note, furthermore, that to maintain the myth of progress, this type of narrow regionalism must keep at bay ‘corrupting’ outside forces in a manner similar to the one described by Amy Kaplan in her reading of imperial fictions of domestication from the 1850s. It is no longer just vanished Indians that must somehow be kept out but also the disruptive influences of modern business, industry, and intellectual life. But as Norris presciently warns with reference to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), disconnecting from the outside world and ‘change does not recapture the past. It loses the future.’<sup>60</sup>

### *Reversing the Plot*

In making these comments I do not mean to say that stories of progressive recovery and pastoral idyll have been hegemonic in Plains literature throughout the twentieth century. In the case of Kroetsch’s field-note poetry and Heat-Moon’s deep map of Chase County, Kansas it is, as we shall see, a matter of assessing the extent to which they continue to infiltrate literary discourses and affect the way the region is represented and understood. Moreover, as Carolyn Merchant’s phrase ‘fall and recovery’ indicates, the story of Western civilisation is declensionist as well as ascensionist. We can convince ourselves of this by returning to Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*, Grove’s *Fruits of the Earth*, and Cather’s *O Pioneers!* in order to continue to trace their plot lines. In Rølvaag and Grove’s novels, readers experience the disillusionment of both Per Hansa and Abe Spalding. Rather than straightforwardly celebrating the transformation of desert into garden, the novels depict and explain the



fall from the garden state with recourse to the land – blizzards, tornadoes, droughts, floods etc. – and psychological flaws such as hubristic ambition and greed.

Other novels explain declensions of the progressive plot with more explicit references to economic, political, and social forces. Even during the period when the idealising garden motif was at its most dominant, it is possible to identify Plains fiction that sets about exploring the contradictions and reversals of this plot from socio-economic and -cultural perspectives, for example Frank Norris' *The Pit* (1901) from his 'Empire of Wheat' series and Lewis Sinclair's *Main Street* (1918). Norris does not explain the 'resistless subjugation of [...] the lakes and prairies' with reference to mythical acts of cosmogenesis or the hard work of rugged pioneer characters. Instead the text explains landscaping as a result of the hegemonic economic power of urban centres – here Chicago – and the way it reaches into and dominates peripheral areas:

The Great Grey City, brooking no rival, imposed its dominion upon a reach of country larger than many a kingdom of the Old World. For thousands of miles beyond its confines was its influence felt. Out, far out, far away in the snow and shadow of Northern Wisconsin forests, axes and saws bit the bark of century-old trees, stimulated by this city's energy. Just as far to the southward pick and drill leaped to the assault of veins of anthracite, moved by her central power. Her force turned the wheels of harvester and seeder a thousand miles distant in Iowa and Kansas...<sup>61</sup>

In a similar manner, the effect of boom-and-bust cycles on the region's economy and ecology – foreclosures, depopulation, and erosion – features prominently in novels

such as Lois Hudson's *The Bones of Plenty* (1962), and Douglas Unger's *Leaving the Land* (1984). Hudson's novel tells the tragic story of the Custer family who struggle to eek out an existence as tenant farmers during years of drought and depression in the 1930s. Despite their pride and best efforts, the family is finally forced to leave the farm when the head of the family, George, cannot accept the terms offered to him by the land owner, Mr. Vick. Set in rural South Dakota, Unger's family saga picks up where Hudson's novel ends. It follows three generations of Hogans from the 1930s to the 1980s. A central theme in the novel is the family's attempt to hold on to their homestead and identity as yeoman farmers in the face of crop failures, the Depression, war, and corporate America in the shape of a local turkey-processing plant named Nowell-Safebuy. Unlike the Custers, the Hogans manage to keep hold of their land and the novel ends with a third-generation Hogan, Kurt, returning to the family homestead and taking on the mantle of his agrarian heritage. But far from painting a rosy and optimistic picture of this heritage, *Leaving the Land* presents yeoman farming as a question of survival. Like his ancestors, Kurt is 'still waiting out there for something, still holding on, counting the years by illnesses and deaths.'<sup>62</sup>

What all of these novels have in common is that they invert rather than displace the myth of agrarian settlement as progressive and pastoral. They represent a strand of Plains literature that seeks to demystify the agrarian myth by exploring its downside. With the exception of those texts that seek naturalist explanations in the land or the human psyche, they mainly do so by dissecting claims of progress and pastoralism. Commonly, this is done from a perspective that is critical of the forces of the market and corporate capitalism, and queries their social, economic, and environmental impact on the region's landscape and inhabitants. As a consequence,

the retelling of the recovery narrative often takes tragic, stoic, or ironic turns, or, as is the case of the West in Ron Hanson's 'Playland', a turn towards pastiche.

In this short story from Hanson's *Nebraska Stories* (1989), an agricultural exhibit from 1918 is turned into a Las Vegas-style garden theme-park. Tellingly, the simulated West that this garden represents has no other referent in social space than itself: 'Playland was everywhere they looked, insisting on itself.'<sup>63</sup> To one Plains scholar this pastiche of a garden amounts to 'a wholly artificial and useless world.'<sup>64</sup> However, the story does hint at possible responses to the problems that the reproduction of the garden myth as tourist spectacle causes. Two events in particular seem significant. The first one is the arrival in the garden by plane of a showy and brass Easterner and the second the subsequent discovery of a giant turtle in the park's swimming pool. On a figurative level the former suggests that if outside interests are allowed to shape the Plains in their image, they will exploit it for financial gain while emptying it of its historical and geographical significance. By contrast, the latter signals that in response the natural world and a deeper memory of place are likely to fight back and offer up an emplaced and enriched placial narrative.

#### *The Character of the Plot: from linear to non-linear*

From a formal point of view, the majority of the texts I have looked at so far in this introductory chapter can be categorised at a meta-narrative level according to the way they represent the region's spatial history as a series of recoveries and falls. Put differently, they are under the influence of and perpetuating a spatial discourse that is defined by a series of common binary tropes and narrative structures, for example, chaos/order, ascension/declension, wilderness/landscape, and garden/desert. In her study of Plains literature, Diane Dufva Quantic corroborates this notion when she concludes that 'the myths are embedded firmly enough in our national consciousness

that writers can satirize and parody them with confidence: the myths are inverted, not transformed.’<sup>65</sup> The implication is that not only are these mythic narratives an asset, they are also robust enough to survive subversive attacks. The fact that they are not transformed into or displaced by other stories of place characterised by different tropes and narrative patterns brings up the question of the character of the plot: is there no getting away from this discourse? Are there no other ways of thinking about and representing space and place in Plains literature?

In one sense Quantic is of course right to suggest that the myths have become firmly embedded. The recovery narrative with its ascensionist and declensionist plot lines and established inventory of spatial tropes constitutes an always already presence that Plains writers cannot ignore nor easily subvert, erase, or displace. In another sense, however, this perspective also renders the scope of Quantic’s inquiry too narrow. Her study does not take into account a number of texts that go beyond the well-established narrative patterns and tropes of the fall and recovery meta-narrative. By focusing on this mythos as it is played out in Plains fiction, one risks, in other words, overlooking literary geographies that do not conceive of and represent the place in a linear or binary manner.

Indeed, one area that Quantic does not explore concerns texts that depict the Plains in a non-linear fashion. Her survey of the region’s fiction does not consider the literary geographies of works such as Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994), Aritha van Herk’s *No Fixed Address* (1986), Robert Kroetsch’s novels *Gone Indian* (1973) and *Badlands* (1975), or his labyrinthine long poems. Commonly, these texts by prominent Native American and Canadian writers deploy Indian trickster figures to trope and structure their landscapes in a non-linear fashion.<sup>66</sup> In a similarly telling instance, *The Nature of the Place* lists William Least Heat Moon’s *PrairieErth*

in its bibliography, but does not mention nor discuss this deep map of Chase County, Kansas elsewhere. Neither does Quantic's study engage with related genre hybrids such as the multi-storied and palimpsest bio-geographies of Kathleen Norris' *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, John Janovy Jr.'s *Keith County Journal*, or Don Gayton's *The Wheatgrass Mechanism*. Because such texts are left unattended, the study is not in a position to probe into the spatial imagination of a number of Plains writers who seek to lift the region to literary expression from alternative geo-historiographical and aesthetic points of view as part of an attempt to query and alter the character of the plot.<sup>67</sup>

In her essay 'Reinventing Eden' Carolyn Merchant also addresses the question of the character of the plot. Of particular relevance to this study is a number of observations she makes on the power and limitations of linearity in negotiating the relationship between people and land:

The declensionist and progressive plots that underlie the meta-narrative of recovery both gain power from their linearity. Linearity is not only conceptually easy to grasp; it is also a property of modernity itself. Mechanistic science, progress, and capitalism all draw power from the linear functions of mathematical equations – the upward and downward slopes of straight lines and curves. To the extent that these linear slopes intersect with a real material world, they refer to a limited domain only.<sup>68</sup>

This extract makes it clear, firstly, that the form that narrative structures and tropes give to literary representations of place is ideological. Translating landscapes into text along linear lines forms part of a wider cultural discourse that produces reality in the

sense of a social space. Secondly, it also makes the point that the linearity characteristic of the modern recovery narrative and its subplots refers ‘to a limited domain only’. As we shall see, these questions of form and ideology – what we might also refer to as the politics of the aesthetic – as they relate to placial narratives feature centrally in the literary geographies of Kroetsch and Heat-Moon. In particular, their texts address them through a mode of inquiry concerned with un-hiding what the ‘limited domain’ of the linear leaves out, obscures, or erases through, for example, temporocentrist historiographies and visual modes of representation.

With the dual focus on literary form and ideology in mind, we can begin to appreciate what Robert Kroetsch is getting at when he writes in one of his critical essays that in Canadian literature concerned with space and place:

The quest of narrative, finally, is for the form of its quest. In our time, this questing has taken on proportions that silence some writers, that drive others back to the shelter of banal conventions. But the best of our writers, from [Sheila] Watson and Ross, on through Ondaatje and [Audrey] Thomas (into the future too, I would hope), accept the terrors and the obligations and the necessary violence of that questing.<sup>69</sup>

By emphasising the form that the ‘quest of narrative’ takes, Kroetsch alludes to a meta-narrative awareness concerned with documenting and reflecting on the shaping of space and place that takes place during the creative act. A central aspect of this writerly practice is a self-reflexive and critical engagement with tradition, most notably the aforementioned ‘recitation of content and form’ which, according to

Kroetsch, tells him ‘little’ and conceals from him ‘what it was I wanted to say’.<sup>70</sup> It is in this formalist sense of quest then that narrative becomes violent in the first instance. In so far as this practice is both destructive and creative, it owes a debt in Kroetsch’s work, firstly, to the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger’s notion of ‘Destruktion’ and ‘Abbau’ and, following on from Heidegger, the deconstructivist strategies of post-structuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

As for the character that this violent questing may lend to plot, we can once again turn to Merchant. Having set out her argument for the limitations of linearity, she ends her essay by proposing a plot outline that is not linear, progressive, or teleological:

Chaos theory and complexity theory suggest that only the unusual domain of mechanistic science can be described by linear differential equations. The usual – that is, the domain of everyday occurrences, such as the weather, turbulence, the shapes of coastlines, and the arrhythmic fibrillations of the human heart – cannot be so easily described. The world is more complex than we know or indeed can ever know. The comfortable predictability of the linear slips away into the uncertainty of the indeterminate – into discordant harmonies and disorderly order.<sup>71</sup>

To my knowledge, no one has written a fictional or non-fictional geography or history of the prairies from the point of view of chaos or complexity theory. But as we shall see, the archaeological approaches through which Kroetsch and Heat-Moon map the place uncover telling instances of the ‘discordant harmonies’ and ‘disorderly order’ that Merchant associates with ‘everyday occurrences’ and indeterminacy. This

approach perhaps finds its most programmatic expression in Kroetsch's dictum that place achieves a paradoxical unity in disunity in the case of Canada and the prairie region.<sup>72</sup> In his creative writing, discordant harmonies and disorderly order also permeate the series of long poems that Kroetsch commenced in 1973. Rather than each poem constituting a neatly demarcated and unified whole, the series is better understood as a continuing, labyrinthine text of jarring voices and contradicting statements assembled by a writer who is situated in media's res. He is, in other words, without recourse to a place or perspective that is somehow outside of place. For this reason, the landscapes of Kroetsch's field poetry are necessarily incomplete but, in a paradoxical sense, they also appear more complete than conventional representations of place – such as landscape prospects and cartographic maps – that seek closure, fixity, and finality. In a similar manner, the loose narrative threads, digressions, and figurative black holes of *PrairyErth* render the order of its deep map disorderly and incomplete. Just as Merchant points to the non-linearity of weather, turbulence, and coastlines, so Heat-Moon's deep map of Chase County traces the rhizomatic flows of waterways, branches, and roots.<sup>73</sup> Within its non-linear placial imaginary, we are told, place radiates 'infinite lines in an indefinite number of directions' (PE, 246).

#### *Literary Archaeology: un-creating plot lines*

In tracing a shift from linear to non-linear, I do not wish to imply that linear narratives per se cannot account for non-linear aspects of place and space. What is noticeable in the context of Plains literature, however, is how linearity recurrently manifests itself in notions of progress (temporal, spatial), perspective (grid, landscape prospects), and rationality (science, technology, and economics). In accordance with Merchant's thesis of an overarching and 'grand narrative of fall and recovery', we are again reminded of dichotomous representations of the place as either desert or garden,



wilderness or landscape along ascensionist and declensionist plot lines, and of how they fail to take into account significant domains of its natural as well as cultural history.<sup>74</sup> Despite drawing on very different intellectual and cultural sources, the archaeological approaches adopted by Kroetsch and Heat-Moon to interrogate these narratives can be described in a general sense as genealogical.

The type of genealogy in question resembles the patiently documentary mode of interrogating history and practices of history writing that Michel Foucault develops in studies such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and *The Order of Things* (1970). It operates by un-hiding events and stories from ‘the most unpromising places’, those one would not expect to find included in ‘official’ histories, for example the stories of black people and prostitutes in historical accounts of the West informed by the frontier thesis.<sup>75</sup> By uncovering such elements, the archaeological approach identifies gaps and indeterminacies in narratives that seek to explain the histories of civilisations, nations, and places as the outcome of a series of causally linked and progressively unfolding events that can be traced back to points of origin. Explicating the historical significance of subjugated, marginalized, and silenced voices and events thus interrupts temporally and spatially linear historical narratives. Moreover, in doing so, they also enable the genealogist to query the historical conditions that made possible the formation of powerful discourses such as the frontier thesis in American history. To Foucault and his followers, the complex of ideas, attitudes, and values that inform these discourses and their claims to truth are seen to be in need of close scrutiny because they do not simply explain history. Among other things, they also influence the way people understand and inhabit the world. In the context of the North American West, for example, notions of wilderness, landscape, progress, and pastoralism may be described as capillary in so far as they ‘reach[] into the very grain

of individuals, touch[] their bodies and insert[] [themselves] into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.’<sup>76</sup> On the one hand, then, the genealogical approach is epistemological in that it questions how our knowledge of the world is produced. On the other, it is also ontological in so far as it seeks to intervene in how this knowledge operates in shaping this world.

The recurrent references to the work of Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault in Kroetsch’s writing explicitly situate it within a European post-structuralist and deconstructivist matrix. By comparison, correspondences to this matrix are of a more oblique kind in Heat-Moon’s writing, arising mainly from his interest in mapping as a hybrid, polyvalent, and transgressive activity. In *PrairyErth*, for example, he interrogates conventional ways of seeing the prairies through the lenses of cartography and landscape via a number of mapping tropes ranging from Native American weaving and time pools to anthropological thick description and archaeological grids. In addition to displaying distinct genealogical traits, the resultant deep mapping also bears an uncanny resemblance to Derrida’s notions of semantic indeterminacy and of texts as built and buildings (here: landscape) as written thanks to the metaphor of weaving that binds words such as ‘textual’, ‘texture’ and ‘-tecture’ together.<sup>77</sup>

Such post-structuralist and deconstructivist approaches to place and space are rarely in evidence in Plains literature and scholarly responses to it, yet they seem to hold considerable analytical promise and explanatory power. For this reason, this dissertation pays close attention to how this strand of European critical theory finds a route onto the prairies via a Canadian writer. Born and raised on the plains of Alberta and working as an editor of the journal *boundary 2* with Bill Spanos in the 1970s, Kroetsch’s orientation is at once intensely local and transnational. His literary

exploration of a settler region combines a Williamsque search for a local pride in the vernacular with post-structuralist thinking on the borders and boundaries of place. In addition to Foucauldian genealogy, the most notable influence is perhaps Derrida's notion of semantic indeterminacy as a destabilizing influence on established dichotomous boundaries. What these modes of inquiry share in the context of Kroetsch's writing is the potential to demystify and deconstruct placial representations in the face of narrow regionalism and nationalism. Moreover, looking at key texts of what Randall Roorda and Susan Maher identify as an incipient deep-map genre of eco-literature, it also seems that post-structuralist and deconstructivist modes of inquiry may help us illuminate place-making strategies and practices in Great Plains literature more generally.<sup>78</sup>

As words such as field notes and deep map indicate, the type of literary archaeology practised by writers like Kroetsch, Heat-Moon, Gayton, and Janovy involves immersion in and movement across 'unpromising' topographies – at one point Heat-Moon describes the prairies as 'a vastly exposed place of concealment' – in an attempt to unhide local particulars and historical specificities (PE, 28). By unearthing natural features, artefacts and events from the realms of biome (prairie grasses, roots), topography (stone, arrowheads, waterways), and archives (newspapers, diaries, seed catalogues, court journals), their field work un-conceals what commonplace versions of the recovery meta-narrative commonly leave out, obscure, or erase. In the texts of Kroetsch and Heat-Moon, the lifting of local findings to literary expression results in fragmented representations of place, what might be described in Foucauldian terms as 'spaces of dispersion'.<sup>79</sup> In the case of Kroetsch's long poems this happens quite literally as they break up conventional textual space, including the layout of a historical ledger and seed catalogue on which the first

editions of the poems 'The Ledger' and 'Seed Catalogue' are super-imposed. In the case of *PrairyErth* violence to textual space is of a more figurative kind carried out through a series of tropes equating deep mapping with a three-dimensional collaging of the facts of anthropological thick description, the shards of archaeological digging, the daubs of impressionist painting, and the threads of Native American weaving.

Rather than representing place and landscape as fixed, framed, and enclosed in the visual tradition of cartography and landscape art, this type of literary archaeology conceives of and represents place as an unfinished product of cultural encounters and natural movements; of what Heat-Moon refers to as a contingent non-teleological history of 'transgressing, regressing, transgressing' and 'transit and translation' (PE, 158 & 103). In a similar manner, the erasure and inscription, losing and finding, and absences and presences of Kroetsch's field notes are also indicative of a place that is always already in a process of palimpsest becoming. Unlike landscape painters and cartographers, the immersed and emplaced literary archaeologist does not operate with a subject-object division that objectifies landscape and connotes spatial command and control from a privileged vantage point. Nor do the palimpsest and dispersed spaces of these literary geographies purport to offer a mimetic representation of a landscape out there in the classical structuralist sense of signifier-signified correspondence. Instead meta-narrative commentary and acknowledgements of intertextual borrowings signal to the reader that literary place-making is a symbolic and discursive act less concerned with truth than with issues of construction and power (erasure, marginalization, dominance, hegemony) as they relate both to the representation and production of space. By repeatedly referring to themselves as artefacts, the texts point to their own historicity and materiality, reminding the reader of a fact that at times is blinding in its obviousness, namely that '([s]ocial) space is a

(social) product'.<sup>80</sup> It is as products situated in time and place that the textual artefacts both contribute to and intervene in a wider cultural production of space.

Giving form to place in this way subjects the templates of dominant historical narratives to critical examination. Even if literary archaeology involves a quest for the form of narrative in the first place, as Kroetsch alleges, it also performs a number of tactical and strategic manoeuvres that are of ideological and political significance. These are meant to violate a certain kind of historical discourse for which Kroetsch claims to have 'considerable disdain or distrust' because it is 'a form of narrative that is coercive. I don't trust the narrative of history because it begins from meaning instead of discovering meanings along the way.'<sup>81</sup> As we shall see, both Kroetsch and Heat-Moon count among coercive histories overarching narratives of fall and recovery and their tropical indexes of wilderness, desert, landscape, and garden in its edenic, classical, and modern agrarian sense. In Kroetsch's critical essays these linear narrative templates are repeatedly associated with 'closure' and 'entrapment' that render place geographically and semantically fixed, centred, and known. The implication is that in doing so they also exclude and leave out to the point where they name place 'out of existence' (CFN, p. 34). To displace this form of obscuring history writing, Kroetsch proposes a strategy of narrative decentring:

*We have sought out the decentering rather than the centering function of myth. It is a way to resist entrapment, to resist ending and completion. On the circumference we can defer meaning and other finalities. I want to avoid both meaning and conclusiveness. And one way to achieve this is to keep retelling, keep transforming the story [...] I'm willing to stay out here where the rules are shifting and maybe even unknowable. It is, in a*

*word of Beckett, the unknowable: deliberately staying out of the knowable, being interested in what one doesn't know [...] Instead of a fear of myth as closure, and as entrapment, myth can become generative again. But it must be decentered.*<sup>82</sup>

Whereas coercive historical narratives are said to mythicise despite claims of accuracy, transparency, and truth, the strategy of decentring openly admits to being mythic in its attempt to de-mythicise. In its exploration of excluded domains and insistence on retelling, decentring renders place geographically and semantically open, fluid, and non-linear. The absences, contradictions, ambiguities, and polyvalence uncovered in poems such as 'The Ledger' and 'Seed Catalogue' suggest that a degree of opaqueness, indeterminacy, and the unknowable is always already inscribed in place and the stories through which it is told.

By proposing to displace history with myth in this way – or, to be precise, one type of myth for another – writers like Kroetsch and Heat-Moon aim to unsettle binaries that commonly inform narratives of space and place, for example, detached/immersed, linear/rhizomatic, horizontal/vertical, homogenous/heterogeneous, essential/contingent, and roots/routes.<sup>83</sup> In doing so, we might say that decentring is a destructive strategy in the first place. Through the use of mimicry, parody, contradiction, cut-up, collaging and so on, it violates and subverts narratives and tropes which conceal the place from us, most notably perhaps, the prairies as a garden created out of nothing. Decentring does not, however, involve a straightforward displacement of one binary element with its counterpart. If it did, it would effectively reproduce the dichotomous structure by simply inverting the relationship between its parts, valorising immersion, rhizome, and routes while repressing detachment,

linearity, and roots. But not only do coercive elements remain deeply engrained in spatial discourses and consciousness as demonstrated by Quantic when she speaks of the cultural embeddedness of Western myths. The elements of the binaries are also structurally related from a semantic point of view, that is to say, to be able to talk of linearity or rootedness requires a concept of non-linearity and rootlessness.

What the subversive strategy of decentring and retelling does do, however, is transform narratives of the prairie place. The fragmented, palimpsest and non-linear narratives that it secretes challenge Quantic's thesis that linear myths of ascension/declension, wilderness/landscape etc. 'are embedded firmly enough in our national consciousness that writers can satirize and parody them with confidence: the myths are inverted, not transformed.' By way of decentring and retelling, literary archaeology produces unsettled textual sites where resistance to established placial myths – and the beliefs, attitudes, and values that they engender – become possible. Understood in this way, we can begin to appreciate literary archaeology as a practice that is not just destructive but also generative.

As mythic narratives, *Field Notes* and *PrairieEarth* become generative through assemblage and collaging of placial fragments. In the latter deep mapping involves a weaving together of shards that adds texture and depth to the abstract, homogenous, and linear space of grid, landscape and temporocentrist histories. A key premise of Heat-Moon's argument for deep mapping is, as we shall see, that grand narratives of space and place tend towards generalisation, abstraction, and voiding. Doing so, it follows, conceals and erases placial particulars and risks alienating people from the places they inhabit. By comparison, the dispersed space of Kroetsch's field notes displays lower levels of cohesion. This is indicative, it would seem, of an underlying assumption that while they enquire into the *possibility* of articulating a sense of place

and a local pride, the poems do not actually express one positively and affirmatively. The closest they come to doing so is through the aforementioned sense of unity in disunity that arises from the lines of erasure and flight that characterise the ‘palimpsest of prairie’ (CFN, 45). It is for the same reason that it is telling when the early prairie poems do not end but merely come to a halt in a question which leaves both writer and reader facing the open field of landscape and text: ‘*Adam and Eve got drowned—/ who was left?*’ (CFN, 46, italics in original).

This open question is symptomatic of how the unknown and unknowable feature prominently and polyvalently in a number of recent non-linear, palimpsest histories of the Plains. Looking at Dan Gayton’s *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* in particular and the ‘incipient’ deep map genre more generally, Susan Maher concludes that ‘at the heart of any deep map is mystery.’<sup>84</sup> Using rhetoric with less essentialist and romanticist connotations, Kroetsch’s fiction and critical essays also remind the reader that knowing a place involves a degree of not knowing and as such may become a catalyst for a negative capability.<sup>85</sup> To writers like Kroetsch, Heat-Moon, and Gayton, gaps, absences, and silences interrupt placial genealogies and thus take on a presence that imbue them with both creative and critical force. By disrupting and displacing, there is a sense in which the unknown and unknowable clear space for the imagination to roam in its attempt to re-map spatial histories. Understood in this way, the need for a negative capability lends support to Richard Manning’s point that ‘in this deep-time travel imagination is almost all we have.’<sup>86</sup> It is interesting to note, moreover, how this mode of clearing is formally similar to the one with which earlier settler literature emptied the land before it to be able to inscribe it with a Euro-American spatial order. What is different this time around, however, is that the critical intent of the spatial imagination now seeks to break the common sense illusion of



transparency, continuity, centeredness, and fixity which its predecessor had a formative hand in creating.

There is finally another sense in which the gaps, absences, and silences become obstructive in the retelling of the Plains story. This happens when they deny and frustrate the narrative and poetic voices' recurring homing and rooting desire. At such points in the texts, we can register how a personal and communal desire for a sense of placial continuity and sameness intersects with the differences and ruptures that characterise the historical experience on the ground. When they do so, we can see how absences force both writer and reader to try to come to terms with living in and with what one does not know. One consequence of the 'dividual' – fragmented, dispersed, routed – as opposed to individual – clearly demarcated, united, rooted – sense of place that this leads to is that the literary archaeologist must operate with lower levels of self-definition than, say, classical pioneer characters of frontier narratives. These 'rugged figures' and the 'whole' states they turned into 'farms' by subduing 'the wild land and [breaking] up virgin prairie' are being decentred, deconstructed, and displaced.<sup>87</sup> The disorder, indeterminacy, and anxiety that the retelling of this culturally dominant narrative uncovers result instead in a dialogic and differential sense of place engendered by movements across multiple unstable borders (local, regional, national, international, ecological, semantic, epistemic etc.) and encounters with difference.

These changes in spatial imagination, then, from a static, detached, enclosed, and unified vision of place towards one that is dynamic, immersed, layered, porous, and differential are not only a sign of a territorial dispute that is formal and aesthetic. They also mark a discursive intervention that is ideological and geo-political in its deconstruction of commonplace binaries and a mediation of space in which

rhizomatic routes rather than seeded roots are constitutive of place. Through an insistence on formal matters, this mode of literary archaeology articulates a critique of that complex of notions, attitudes and practices for which we might use Merchant's shorthand 'grand narrative of fall and recovery'. At times the critique of the classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment components of this modern meta-narrative is implied at others explicit. However, its subplots of science, technology, capitalism, and Christianity are consistently identified as nodal points of a dominant regional discourse on space and place, and inextricably linked to a rhetoric of progress, pastoralism, and rationality.

### *The Roots/Routes of the Place*

Just as William Carlos Williams' sought to articulate a local pride in the vernacular in *Paterson*, so the texts studied here may be said to share a similar aim. They seek in different and sometimes contradicting ways to articulate a sense of place and being in place that is both deep and 'deeply felt' in Lawrence Buell's sense of increasing 'our feel for both places previously unknown and places known but never so deeply felt.'<sup>88</sup> In the same way that Cather in '[a] 1905 letter to Kate Cleary stated [her] desire to render an America that had not yet been portrayed in fiction – the small-town, Midwestern world of Nebraska', so Kroetsch writes in the 1970s with reference to Williams that 'a local pride is where you've got to being, and we didn't have a local pride. Because all the models were telling us we didn't even exist.'<sup>89</sup> Continuing this project of lifting the Plains to literary expression, Heat-Moon defines the objective of his deep map, published in 1991, as to know and belong to 'this prairie place' 'in the deepest sense' (PE, 105).

As my tracing of salient elements of a Plains literary geography has suggested, this 'deeply felt' leads some writers and critics towards roots in its essentialist and

originary sense. To others it leads to routes that engender a differential sense of place, the product of encounters between cultural as well as natural forces. In her study of 'the narrative poetics of geopolitical identity', *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounters* (1998), Susan Stanford Friedman proposes a working definition of roots/routes as a form of relational spatialisation that incorporates the opposing dimensions of the homonyms. Instead of insisting on a dichotomous distinction, the literary narratives of identity that she analyses are characterised by a 'dialogic pull of routes and roots'.<sup>90</sup> It is from a similar dialogic perspective that I attempt to demonstrate in this study how the dichotomous distinction between roots and routes and its deconstruction continue to mark important fault lines in Great Plains literature.

On the one hand, rooting enables writers to attach themselves to place and advance claims for its originality, authenticity, uniqueness, and special value. In the case of the Plains, this cannot simply be dismissed out of hand as a retreat into a parochial form of self-identity and self-sufficiency, although it is necessary to do so at times. Sometimes rooting has to be considered as part of a strategy for survival and visibility in the face of forces that threaten to obscure or obliterate place. However, this strategy must always be balanced against the danger of sliding into mysticism in the sense of place and space as somehow metaphysical, essential, or natural. David Stouck detects the latter tendency in Cather's fictional landscapes which 'are always, I think, to some extent determined by this search – for a people and culture rooted in a place.'<sup>91</sup> As to the nature of this place, several prominent Cather scholars have read it as possessing an inherent order and identity. On Cather's quest for a Plains sense of place Susan Rosowski notes, for example, that '[i]t was as though [she] realized that [...] the essential challenge was to recognize the order inherent in the land, and to

love the land for it. It was a challenge, in short, to see beauty.’<sup>92</sup> In a similar manner, Bernice Slote argues for the self-identity of the character of both land and author when she writes of Cather that ‘[l]ike her own country, she was herself and she was everyone.’<sup>93</sup>

It is due in large part to this rooting discourse that Cather’s fictional landscapes have come to be seen by many as quintessentially Midwestern. Robert Thacker, for example, writes in *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989) that ‘authors have had to devise techniques designed to articulate the vast essence of the prairie landscape’ and how ‘as this book seeks to demonstrate, prairie landscape conventions and techniques of symbolic depiction have been derived from the essential elements of the land itself’. The essentialism and determinism of this geo-aesthetics both support and extend the arguments put forward by Rosowski and Slote, and hence, it comes as little surprise when Thacker adds that

Willa Cather, the most subtle artist yet to record the landscape, wrote that on the prairie “the great fact was the land itself”. It still is, and this book attempts first to define and then to trace the processes – recorded in literary texts – by which Europeans and their descendants came to understand the imaginative demands of prairie space and to incorporate them into esthetic conventions.<sup>94</sup>

Underpinning all of these arguments is a premise that space/place possesses inherent, immutable, and essential characteristics which great writers are able to perceive and distil into superior literary geographies. This type of placial rooting not only assigns trans- or a-historical qualities to literary texts. It also brings with it a risk of losing

sight of, diminishing, and obscuring some of the powerful cultural and systemic forces – of which, ironically, this academic discourse is itself part – that have shaped the place historically. These forces were perhaps most dramatically in evidence in the removal of the region's pre-settlement inhabitants and grasses, but they can also be traced in the transfer and spread of aesthetic categories, sensibilities, and practices across continents and cultures.

As we shall see in detail later on, key conflicts and tensions of this rooting/routing debate are played out in an exemplary manner in Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth*. A main purpose of his deep map is to reverse the declensionist plot lines of so-called 'progressive civilization' by arguing for ecological restoration and sustainable inhabitation (PE, 72). However, in weaving the story of a culturally sustainable deep map, *PrairyErth* verges on mysticism as it traces its roots to the profound and inscrutable depths of the 'not quite' supernatural realm of a 'dreamtime cartography' (PE, 441). Yet at the same time, the literary archaeologist's pedestrian traversing of Chase County is indicative of a desire to elucidate and accept its historicity and that of the Plains region more generally. It is, as we shall see, this impulse which prompts a sustained tracing of the endless minutiae and infinite routes of the county's cultural and natural landscape. Thus, it is by writing in the tension-filled and sometimes anxiety-ridden in-between of roots and routes that the text becomes exemplary of how, in mapping the prairies, the writer must self-reflexively navigate between a desire to go eco-Indian in a rooted sense and an inclination to unearth the routes that have shaped the Plains historically, and which the former risks obscuring.<sup>95</sup>

In so far as they enact these mapping strategies, the four texts studied here first of all remind the reader of the cultural nature of literary place-making. The texts by

Kroetsch and Heat-Moon in particular challenge notions of the history of the Plains as a chronologically linear series of events that can be neatly divided into self-contained frontier and post-frontier periods charting either cultural progress or decline. By self-reflexively constructing and situating their narratives as historical artefacts, the revisionist literary geographies of *Field Notes* and *PrairieEarth* cast the Plains as a regional landscape that was always already a contested ground, the product of complex historical and narrative dialogics of geo-political, socio-economic, and cultural, including, aesthetic forces. In this regard, their literary geographies constitute ideological mediations that interrogate multiple and multivalent borders of personal, local, regional, national, and transnational significance. In doing so, they illustrate, furthermore, how changing, multivalent tropes are capable of both perpetuating and contesting literary and culturally dominant modes of representing the region. Just as the steel plough serves as a symbol of an agrarian heartland myth in settler lore, so it also functions as a symbol of the removal of native biome, fauna, and peoples to contemporary writers and critics of an ecological orientation. As Sue Maher notes, ‘the technology of the plow, far more destructive than the technology of fire, overturned ancient roots, the heart’s blood of the prairie, and in a heartbeat – 150 years – 99 percent of the grasslands ecosystem disappeared.’<sup>96</sup>

It is finally by paying close attention to how such tensions and conflicts are played out within a multi-storied and palimpsest history of place and space that we discover with Edward Casey ‘that we cannot maintain that place or space is simply one kind of thing, to be discovered once and for all. Not only is space not absolute and place not permanent, but the conception of each is subject to the most extensive historical vicissitudes.’<sup>97</sup> An important corollary of acknowledging and beginning to examine these vicissitudes, as they appear in a literary context, is, as Iain Chambers

explains, that 'historicizing displacement leads us away from nostalgic dreams of "going home" to a mythic, metaphysical location and into the realm of theorizing a way of "being at home" that accounts for the 'myths we know to be myths yet continue to cling to, cherish and dream' alongside 'other stories, other fragments of memory and traces of time'; or more accurately in the context of this study, traces of space and place.<sup>98</sup>

In extension of Chambers' argument, it may be suggested that by untangling the roots/routes of literary dis- as well as emplacement, we come to realise that the historical as well as moral complexity of place need not be a deterrent to the power of its telling as story. In fact, the contrary is likely to be true as proposed by Patricia Limerick in her history of the American West:

moral complexity provides the base for parables and tales of greater and deeper meaning. Myths resting on tragedy and on unforeseen consequences, the ancient Greeks certainly knew, have far more power than stories of simple triumphs and victories. In movies and novels, as well as in histories, the stories of men and women who both entered and created a moral wilderness have begun to replace the simple contests of savagery and civilization, cowboys and Indians, white hats and black hats. By questioning the Westerner's traditional stance as innocent victim, we do not debunk Western history but enrich it.<sup>99</sup>

## 2. Revisiting the Imperial Plains Place of *O Pioneers!*

As the plough against the setting sun in Diane Dufva Quantic's inventory of common Plains images suggests, Willa Cather's Midwestern landscapes are iconic in a regional as well as national sense. Quantic's inclusion of the plough in her 1994 study may be held up as an example of how 'an academic industry' that rivals 'some of the great industries of the literary profession – James, Wharton, Faulkner' has bestowed upon Cather an 'elevated stature in American literature.'<sup>1</sup> As to the stature of her Plains landscapes, we can convince ourselves further of their elevated status by recalling Robert Thacker's claim that Cather is 'the most subtle artist yet to record the landscape' and Susan Rosowski's assertion that 'her fiction during this period [1893-1923] provides a superb example of the ways in which one writer worked out an essential relationship between geography and literature.'<sup>2</sup> Such claims by prominent literary scholars are indicative of the way in which the representation of place in Cather's novels mark key moments in the making of the Great Plains in a literary as well as wider discursive sense. By the latter I have in mind how the 'library of Western culture...functions as ideology when ordinary people read, listen to, internalise, and act out the stories told by their elders – the ministers, entrepreneurs, newspaper editors, and professors who teach and socialize the young.'<sup>3</sup> I am also thinking of how scholarly efforts are complemented by the growth, for example, of a Catherland in and around present-day Red Cloud, Nebraska which serves as a popular destination for literary tourism.<sup>4</sup>

It is exactly because of their iconic status that Cather's Midwestern landscapes are at risk of becoming reified and historically decontextualised, effectively erasing particulars of the historical movement westward from society's collective memory. In



a review of the critical industry surrounding Cather and her texts, Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin explain that they have long been doing so:

Because traditionalist Catherians have dominated, Cather's works have consistently been read in a way that contributes to the reproduction of cultural myths that have come to stand for historical truth – a strain of myth resistant to alternative criticism because of its quintessential “Americanness.”<sup>5</sup>

And, we might add, in a regional context, “Plainsness”. Only a few writers have applied historicist approaches to Cather's writing on space and place, notably Mike Fischer's ‘Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism’, Elisabeth Ammons' “‘The Old Beauty’ and the Issue of Empire’, and Guy Reynolds' *Willa Cather in Context*. Despite their different agendas and aims, these texts all address the risk of allowing the aesthetics of space and place to lift either beyond politics and the social. They do so by situating prairie novels such as *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!* in their historical and cultural contexts, in particular the imperial-colonial advance westward of Euro-American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Reynolds notes, ‘Willa Cather's novels are about empire. They fictionalise the transfer of European empires to America, and the subsequent growth of an American empire.’<sup>6</sup>

Following the lead of these critics, the present chapter approaches the literary making of place in Cather's first major Plains novel from an imperial-colonial perspective. By paying close attention to intercultural and historical aspects, it demonstrates how the troping of Nebraska's tableland in *O Pioneers!* involves a series

of transcontinental transfers and intercultural encounters between the 'new' and the 'old' world. The novel's depiction of a transformation from wilderness into landscape centres on a number of European spatial and visual constructs such as wilderness, landscape, garden, and survey map. As a result, key spatialising images gloss over salient elements of the pre-settlement landscape and the settlement process itself while reifying the pioneer landscape and the values it embodies. In addition, by presenting place-making as a transformation of wilderness into landscape, Cather's narrative also inscribes itself within a dominant American discourse on spatial recovery, premised on concepts of progress, stadialism, and Manifest Destiny and assumptions of the superiority and dominance of Western culture and civilisation.

However, at the same time that the novel shares key characteristics with a powerful American recovery narrative, its old-world predilections and ethno-racial pluralism are also indicative of a departure from exceptionalist claims made in prominent contemporary versions of this narrative, most notably the frontier theses of Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt. The presence in the novel of cultural pluralism and a critical stance towards a homogenising Americanisation has prompted critics such as Guy Reynolds to describe Cather's Midwestern texts in multicultural terms. This position is not unproblematic, however, since pluralism and diversity is restricted to white, Euro-American cultures with a stress on the European. This not only marks the limitations of any claims for the inclusion of the author's Midwestern landscapes into a contemporary multi-cultural canon of American literature, but is also indicative of the power of a Euro-American agrarian tradition in the region's literary canon more generally.

Finally, I propose that reading the novel's remembered Plains place from an imperial-colonial and intercultural perspective uncovers elements of what Renato

Rosaldo labels 'imperialist nostalgia'. Somewhere beneath the surface and in the margins of 'the happy worlds of *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*', which are 'comfortably dominated by Western European values', the history that they must necessarily write out to preserve 'the romance of empire' re-appears.<sup>7</sup> 'There can be', as Mike Fischer reminds us in his reading of *My Ántonia*, 'no cultural text, however apparently blind to the political preconditions assuring its provenance, that fails to record the traces of those preconditions, in spite of itself.'<sup>8</sup> In the larger context of this dissertation, it is through the unearthing of these 'ob-scene' traces that we can see how an ideological critique of the recovery meta-narrative, the agrarian garden view, and a narrow regional canon becomes possible in literary geographies.

### *Wilderness*

Published in 1913, the opening passage of *O Pioneers!* signals the text's and its author's interest in the history of the American west. It does so by taking as its point of departure a historical rather than mythical place, that is, the Great Plains of the early 1880s: 'One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away' (3). Rather than a placeless wilderness the setting for the opening scene is a western frontier town suspended somewhere between wilderness and civilisation. In a realist register and style the passage depicts a settler town organised according to a standard spatial template of a main street running at a right angle off a railway line and complete with 'grain "elevator"', 'lumber yard', 'general merchandise stores', 'two banks' and a 'post-office' (4). Hence from a historical point of view, the Hanover of the text displays many of the common spatial markers characteristic of Euro-American settlement on the prairies.<sup>9</sup>

Even though the appearance of the town suggests that the prairie wilderness can be transformed into a civilised place, there are obvious signs that the frontier is far from closed and settled. The literary townscape stresses its openness and the precariousness of civilisation on the Plains at this time. It is winter, the ground is 'frozen hard' and buildings are 'huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky' without 'any appearance of permanence' and in danger of 'head[ing] straight for the open plains' (3). The lines and markers that civilisations inscribe on maps and physically on the ground in an attempt to turn unbounded space into enclosed place are perilously close to disappearing. The unbounded prairie is threatening to disperse and erase the physical manifestation of a nascent spatial order in the same way that the colour 'gray' erases the line that demarcates a wider cosmic place-world between 'prairie' and 'sky', heaven and earth (3). For this reason, the emergence of a civilised place as the product of national planning (town plans, streets), a capitalist market place (railway, elevator) and individual enterprise (stores, houses) is in imminent danger of regressing into a chaotic, pre-social void.

From the perspective of a linear conception of space and place as it can be found in the frontier theses of Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt, the opening passage paints a picture of the Western frontier as still very much open, contested and in flux. The main forces contesting the emerging man-made landscape in the novel are the land and the climate. Because of their 'fierce strength' and a 'Genius...unfriendly to man', wilderness has not yet been transformed into a civil and familiar home-place despite the best efforts of the pioneers (15, 20). As we shall see, this element of geographic determinism marks an important impulse in the Euro-American geographical imagination manifest in both the landscape of the novel and the writing of Cather critics who subscribe to the point of view that 'the great fact was

the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes' (15).<sup>10</sup>

As soon as the novel's protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, her younger brother Emil, and their friend, Carl Linstrum, leave town and venture into the country, spatial tropes intensify to convey a heightened sense of being in an 'empty' and barren wilderness (54). We are told that '[t]he little town behind them had vanished as if it had never been' and that the youngsters find themselves moving through a 'stern frozen country', 'sombre wastes', and 'deeper and deeper into the dark country' (15, 18). At this point, the young immigrant girl is lost in a place-bereft void and facing the physical and existential predicament of place-panic. She is looking with 'anguished perplexity into the future' and as Edward Casey reminds us 'the prospect of a strict void, of an utter no-place, is felt to be intolerable' (14).<sup>11</sup> Throughout 'The Wild Land' it is at points like this that Alexandra is 'tired of standing up for this country' and 'wish[es] we could all go...and let the grass grow back over everything' (53, 16).

From the point of view of the European immigrants in Cather's novel, the predicament of placelessness does not just arise from the fact that the land is perceived as a wilderness lacking the human landmarks which define a traditional European spatial order of dwellings, fields and meadows: 'Of all the bewildering things about a new country, the absence of human landmarks is one of the most depressing and disheartening' (19). The sense of placelessness is further exacerbated by the way the text ascribes agency to the wild land for it to resist actively and dramatically attempts at subduing it. It overwhelms, we are told, 'the little beginnings of human society' and is troped metaphorically as a horse that 'runs wild and kicks things to pieces' (15). In addition, by describing the prairie land as 'bewildering',

‘wild’, ‘sombre’, ‘mournful’, and a ‘wilderness’, the narrator also undertakes an exercise in anthropomorphic othering that renders it an alienating and demonic presence in the lives of the Scandinavian pioneers (19, 20, 15, 48). In the eyes of this family of Northern European descent, the new world land is a dangerous ‘other’ that cannot be controlled by knowledge nor practice. Indeed, Mr. Bergson harbours the suspicion ‘that no one understood how to farm it properly’ (22). Because of the land’s resistance and the immigrants’ inability to understand it, the frontier narrative of ‘The Wild Land’ initially moves along a declensionist trajectory that depicts the relationship between man and land as a losing struggle: ‘In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame’ (20).

As the extracts quoted so far indicate, spatial tropes signalling a geographic determinism that is best described as naturalistic far outweigh tropes suggesting successful civilisation and territorialisation. Rather than the iconic plough against the setting sun of *My Ántonia*, ‘[t]he record of the plow [is] insignificant,’ and the valence of land-as-wilderness is overwhelmingly negative in the eyes of the settlers and the narrator (19). But whereas in naturalistic texts, individuals are often portrayed as victims of psychological or societal drives, the settlers in *O Pioneers!* suffer under the unfriendly ‘Genius’ of the land, its soil, climate and wildlife: ‘Bergson went over in his mind the things that had held him back...his cattle had perished in a blizzard,...one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole...a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and again his crops had failed’ (20-1).

In the context of the novel, it is significant that it is through no fault of his own that Mr. Bergson’s errand in the wilderness ends with him dying a melancholy and resigned man. Beheld from his ‘Old-World’ perspective, the prairie land is a natural ‘enigma’ and the conceptual, perceptual and practical chaos it wreaks is summed up

in the metaphor of ‘a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces’ (21-2). Rather than constituting a classic Turnerian frontier topos where the meeting between wilderness and self-reliant individuals results in the emergence of a unique American landscape, the Nebraskan prairie is portrayed initially as a primeval wilderness that the pioneers either lose themselves in or try to escape. Like their peasant ancestors in the East and further back in the old world, they ‘peer [...] at the wilderness through the prism of bewilderment and chaos. Every sort of experience beyond the farthest field [is] distorted by the certainties attendant upon losing one’s way.’<sup>12</sup> Looking out the window from his bed, John Bergson sums up this bewildering sense of losing one’s way in the unbounded space of the prairies beyond his homestead when he observes ‘[t]o the south, his plowed fields; to the east, the sod stables, the cattle corral, the pond, - and then the grass’ (20).

### *Wilderness as a Cultural Construct*

I have noted that the prairie seems a natural wilderness to the pioneer settlers. There is, however, a significant sense in which what the text presents as natural, i.e., land-as-wilderness, is a cultural construct with important ramifications for its fictionalised history of place. The cultural constructedness of wilderness is perhaps most easily understood through a comparison of the European idea of wilderness with Native American objections to land-as-wilderness in relation to Euro-American settlement on the Great Plains. To the Scandinavian Bergsons, wilderness is part of a long-established spatial order that dates back to the agrarian cultures of medieval Europe and defines it structurally in relation to landscape. In the words of John Stilgoe, the agrarian old-world landscape in question objectifies ‘order not only in its intricate arrangement of dwellings and fields and mills and pastures but in its juxtaposition with chaos,’ i.e. wilderness.<sup>13</sup> That the Bergsons are seeking to transfer this common

European spatial order onto the Plains is evident when Mr. Bergson turns the prairie soil into fields and builds stables, a corral, and a 'log house' (29). As for Mrs. Bergson, she tellingly sets about growing a garden because, as Alexandra says, 'were [she] cast upon a desert island, she would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden, and find something to preserve' (29). By shaping the land – landscaping – in this way, the Bergsons try to domesticate what they perceive as wild nature in order to re-establish a culturally specific order that may help them overcome a feeling of placelessness and make them feel at home in the 'new world' instead.

In contrast to the European juxtaposition of landscape and wilderness, Plains Chief Luther Standing Bear offers a radically different representation and understanding of the nature of the prairies:

[w]e did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a wilderness and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful...<sup>14</sup>

Depending on cultural background, 'nature', i.e., the land of the Plains, is not only represented as 'wild' and 'tame' respectively but also valorised negatively and positively. One person's alienating wilderness is another person or culture's cherished 'landscape'. By making this point, I am not saying that Luther Standing Bear's 'nature' is natural, *Natura naturans*, or nature naturing; the nature, home, or landscape of the Plains Indians is also a case of *Natura naturata*, nature natured, i.e. a socially constructed concept that changes over time.<sup>15</sup> What I am suggesting though is



that by viewing the Bergsons' place-making project from an intercultural point of view, we can see how the wilderness they experience does in effect void the Plains landscape of Standing Bear and other Plains Indians. In the text we can trace this voiding to when Alexandra observes that 'the country already looked empty' (54). This other landscape is mainly conspicuous by its absence in *O Pioneers!* despite, historically, having vanished only recently to give way for townscapes like Hanover. Tellingly, when the pre-settlement Plains is mentioned in the text, it is to be found in a subordinate clause and depicted as 'feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races' (20). In the context of the novel's spatial recovery narrative, this sentence does not only seem to be indicative of an erasure of the landscape of the Plains Indians but also of the cultural value or rather lack thereof that the Euro-American immigrants and the narrator attach to it. In addition, it also suggests that the narrator – and presumably Cather with her – is well aware of the region's previous inhabitants, referred to here as 'prehistoric races'. This finding is, as we shall see, of relevance to an ongoing discussion of the (ethnic and ecological) diversity and pluralism of Cather's remembered prairie landscape.

From an intercultural point of view, then, the troping of the prairie as an empty and hostile wilderness to a significant extent voids the region's pre-settlement landscape. To pioneers like John Bergson the grasslands appear a placeless and destructive void that casts them as victims of geography – it is, as we have already seen, through no fault of their own that their errand in the wilderness ends in failure. For this reason, the troping of wilderness as a destructive void is also significant in the sense that it imbues the pioneers' recovery project with a sense of innocence and victimhood that legitimises the westward expansion of Western civilisation. By representing the prairie land(scape) as naturally wild and destructive, the spatial

narrative in 'The Wild Land' does not simply void it. The place-making efforts of the first European and American settlers imply that they are seeking to improve and civilise it in accordance with a culturally dominant meta-narrative of progressive recovery that conceives of and represents American place-making as a transformation from wilderness into landscape. However, the problem throughout most of the first part of the novel is that no one knows how to realise the placefulness of wilderness, that is, make the destructive void creative. To do so requires an act of cosmo- or, more accurately, topogenesis by an idealised pioneer character.

### *From Wilderness to Landscape*

From the place-bereft and threatening wilderness that faced Mr. Bergson and the first wave of settlers on the Nebraskan tableland, Alexandra emerges as an idealised pioneer farmer capable of transforming it into an agrarian landscape, a pastoral idyll of 'youth [and] farming by plowing and planting gardens (summer)'.<sup>16</sup> In the mould of a romantic heroine she embodies pragmatic, rational and spiritual qualities that make her an exemplary Euro-American pioneer 'destined to succeed while so many men broke their hearts and died' (78). The effect of these qualities upon the novel's spatial narrative are particularly in evidence in a central act of topogenesis towards the end of 'The Wild Land' and a series of reifying spatial motifs that threaten to relegate specificities of Euro-American settlement to the periphery of both text and history. But as the mention of vanishing 'pre-historic races' indicates, traces of historical violence, subjugation, speculation, and modernisation can be found in less prominent places within the text. This suggests that the text does not speak with one voice on the topic of settlement, but can be deconstructed from within. However, just as the pre-settlement landscape is perceived to be of little significance and value, so speculation in land and modernisation through technology are considered benign components of a

story of spatial recovery, thus lending support to the main argument put forward here: like the grand narrative of spatial recovery that Merchant identifies as central to our understanding of the shaping of modern America, Cather's story of prairie place-making also grafts elements of science, technology, and capitalism onto a classical recovery narrative, that is, the nature-to-nation plot line of Virgil's eclogues.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, because of the way key spatial motifs represent this grafting, an argument can be made that the novel reifies a story of pioneering settlement.

Throughout *O Pioneers!* a series of images associate and identify Alexandra Bergson with the land in a romantic sense. In a passage towards the end of 'The Wild Land' we learn that her knowledge of what is to come derives from an intimate closeness to the land. We are told that it was 'as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring' (71). Similarly, remarks made by Carl Linstrum corroborate the notion that Alexandra is naturally related to the land. We see this firstly when he comments on how as a young girl it seemed that Alexandra 'had walked straight out of the morning itself', and, secondly, towards the end of the novel when he tells her that "[y]ou belong to the land...as you have always said. Now more than ever" (126, 307). Shortly afterwards the narrator concludes the novel by reuniting its protagonist with the land: '[f]ortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again...' (309). In all these depictions of the relationship between Alexandra and the land there is a striking visceral quality that suggests a romanticized unity between (wo)man and land as the natural source of her superior knowledge and feel for it.

If one looks at *O Pioneers!* from the perspective of a fictionalised history of place, this unity not only helps qualify but also legitimise and naturalise Alexandra's

act of mythic topogenesis in 'The Wild Land'. It does so because it signals to the reader that her knowledge of the land is deeper and more intimate than any of the other settlers or previous inhabitants on the divide. Thus, it is by presenting Alexandra as someone who is naturally and intuitively in union with the land that she becomes an idealised pioneer in a romantic sense. As Susan J. Rosowski has commented on Alexandra's romanticism, '[l]ike the heroine of a fairy tale who must find the key to transformation, Alexandra must learn the secret that will release the land from darkness.'<sup>18</sup> However, even if the key to transformation is romantic rootedness in the land, other contributing factors can be discerned as well, for example, the protagonist's pragmatic and rational qualities and actions.

Alexandra is said to be intelligent and possess 'good judgement', a strong will as well as a strong pair of hands and '[a] simple and direct way of thinking things out' (23, 25, & 24). We see the value of these qualities when she, like the shrewd investors in town, buys up land when others are selling up and leaving the seemingly arid tableland. In a telling passage, Alexandra explains to her disbelieving brothers the logic of the market, which historically played a significant role in shaping the landscape of the middle west: 'The thing to do is to sell our cattle and what little old corn we have, and buy the Linstrum's place. Then the next thing to do is to take out two loans...and buy every acre we can' ' (66). As the price of property does eventually rise again, Alexandra's speculation in land proves her a canny businesswoman. As she explains to Carl Linstrum about her investment in land, '[f]or years after that I was always squeezing and borrowing until I was ashamed to show my face in the banks. And then, all at once, men began to come to me offering to lend me money – and I did n't need it!' (116).

It is possible here to trace a historically accurate account of how the logic and cycles of a capitalist market influenced who amongst the Euro-American pioneers survived and thrived on the Plains.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note, however, that rather than contradicting a mythico-romantic story of placial recovery, the depiction of Alexandra's speculation in land is both indebted to and contributes towards it. When her brother Lou questions how she can know 'that land is going to go up enough to pay the mortgages...And make us rich besides?'"', Alexandra does not offer an answer premised on logic or reason but belief and feeling: "'I can't explain that, Lou. You'll have to take my word for it. I *know*, that's all. When you drive about over the country you can feel it coming'" (67). The romanticism in this answer and her character more generally lies both in her faith in the benign workings of market economics and an intuitive understanding of and natural connection with the land: 'you can feel it coming.'

In a similar manner, the rational strand in her character links her place-making to Enlightenment reason and science, and the technological benefits they bring pioneering farmers. We see this, for example, when 'it fortifie[s] her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security' (70). Practically, her interest in science and technology manifests itself in her learning 'a great deal' from a 'young farmer who had been away at school, and who was experimenting with a new kind of clover hay', and in her putting up 'the first silo on the Divide' even though 'her men were sceptical about it' (64, 88). The rational strand thus links Alexandra's transformation of wilderness into landscape to the Enlightenment subplots of a culturally dominant meta-narrative. The story in question depicts the advent of modern western civilisation on the American continent as a story of recovery aided not only 'by the

Christian doctrine of redemption' but also 'the inventions of science, technology, and capitalism'.<sup>20</sup> As her reply to those querying her silo suggests – 'the only way we can find out is to try' – it is this connection that makes Alexandra and her regional place-making progressive and modern in the context of wider discourse on American empire (89).

The present analysis of Alexandra's pioneer character has tried to demonstrate that it rests on an uneasy conflation of pragmatic, romantic, and rational qualities. The importance of possessing these qualities in relation to pioneering place-making is aptly summed up at the end of the novel when she explains to Carl that 'the people who love it [the land] and understand it are the people who own it for a little while' (308). The reader is asked to infer that Alexandra's character is rounded in the romantic sense of mastering the realms of reason and emotion, thought and feeling as well as being canny in an everyday sense. She looks at the land with 'love and yearning' as well as an investment opportunity. All three strands run incongruously, perhaps even illogically, together in the daughter of a Swedish immigrant to make her an idealised pioneer heroine with both the ability and right to tame the prairie wilderness, rid it of 'its ugly moods', and realise its placefulness; a feat, as we saw, that was beyond her father and most others of the early homesteaders.<sup>21</sup>

The key moment of this transformation occurs towards the end of 'The Wild Land':

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide,

the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. (65)

From its marked position within the text, this often-quoted passage depicts an idealised pioneer heroine's pivotal act of topogenesis. It shows how Alexandra literally tames 'that land', that is, the prairie as other, an empty and destructive wilderness, by bending its 'Genius', 'the great, free spirit which breathes across it' (65). Thanks to her originary place-making powers, she lifts the land further out of 'the waters of geological ages' - a phrase alluding to a mythical, a-historical void that is potentially placeful in so far as it can be spatially differentiated - and hence provides the history of the country with a mythical starting point. Read in this way, Alexandra's taming of 'the Genius of the Divide' constitutes an act of mythical topogenesis. The image of her bending the spirit of a placeless wilderness in order to turn it into a civilised country with a distinct socio-spatial order marks an originary moment in the novel's spatial recovery narrative. It provides, in other words, the Euro-American agrarian landscape that is about to emerge with a mythical starting point, a symbolic story of its own origins 'in the heart of...a woman.'<sup>22</sup> Moreover, because it circumvents the historical 'clearing' of the pre-settlement landscape and links the emergence of an agrarian Plains landscape directly to the realm of 'the waters of geological ages', this passage serves both to root the settler culture in the land and mythicise its recent history.

As it is presented here, this story is imperial-colonial in a significant sense. Through talk of 'taming', 'harnessing', and 'bending' the land and its genius, the first part of the novel deploys the rhetoric of an imperial-colonial discourse of conquest.

However, the actual conquest is not presented as subjugation through the use of force but as liberation. That is to say, Alexandra's bending and taming of the wilderness represents Western spatial and territorial conquest as a liberation of a dangerous and enigmatic land, an other suffering from 'ugly moods' and an unfriendly genius (20). In the context of *O Pioneers!*'s narrative of space and place, this liberation is not only explained but also legitimised and naturalised by reference, firstly, to the negative valence attached to land-as-wilderness tropes and, secondly, to the union between the land and a pioneer heroine. The story of Euro-American settlement on the prairies in 'The Wild Land' and 'Neighbouring Fields' represents Western conquest 'as a genuine liberation' which, as Franco Moretti has noted, is 'possibly the greatest trick of the colonial imagination'.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, if we look briefly at the elevated style of writing and density of lyrical figures in the passage, the impression that Alexandra's imperial-colonial act of topogenesis is mythical is reinforced. The flourishing of lyrical figures stands in striking contrast to the realist register used to depict the historical Hanover townscape in the novel's opening passage and Alexandra's visit to the farms down by the river that immediately precedes her new country epiphany. Eyes drinking, tears blinding, spirits bending and history originating in the heart of an idealised pioneer all contribute to the foregrounding of the romantic qualities that Alexandra and her place-making display. Conversely, it might be argued that in doing so they also threaten to obscure the rational and pragmatic qualities which, as we have already seen, provide more accurate clues to the history of Euro-American settlement. Such mythico-romantic tropes appear, furthermore, not just on the cusp of the transformation from wilderness into landscape but also at other key moments in the text, for example, in its last lines when the narrator expresses the hope that the pioneer Plains place may one



day be recovered: '[f]ortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again...' (309).

Because of the salient position they occupy within the text and the history of place it tells, these tropes relegate historical particulars of the imperial advance westward to the background, thus making *O Pioneers!*'s fictionalised history of this movement more mythical than historical. As Susan Rosowski rightly points out in her study of romanticism in *O Pioneers!*, the author 'is interested primarily in the idealizing imagination.'<sup>24</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than in the idyllic landscape prospect that appears the other side of the thirteen-year gap that separates Alexandra's 'new consciousness of the country' at the end of 'The Wild Land' from the beginning of 'Neighboring Fields' (71). This gap, it should be noted, further adds to the notion of the novel's imagined and remembered Plains as mythical because it eclipses the historical process of tilling, planting, weeding, harvesting, fencing, building, buying, selling, investing, and so on, that cemented the transformation of the Nebraskan tableland into an agrarian landscape during the period, that is, roughly the last decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

### *Landscape*

The outcome of Alexandra's mythical act of topogenesis finds its fullest expression in the opening passage of Part II, 'Neighboring Fields'. The view that greets the reader here marks the successful transformation of a place-bereft wilderness into a placeful landscape idyll:

From the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checker-board,  
marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light.  
Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right

angles. From the graveyard gate one can count a dozen gayly painted farmhouses; the gilded weather-vanes on the big red barns wink at each other across the green and brown and yellow fields. The light steel windmills tremble throughout their frames and tug at their moorings, as they vibrate in the wind that often blows from one week's end to another across that high, active, resolute stretch of country. The Divide is now thickly populated. The rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts. There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing on that country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness. (75-76)

The landscape spectacle depicted in this 'gratifying' 'scene' marks the zenith of the novel's spatial recovery narrative. In stark contrast to the opening townscape scene and the unbounded wilderness surrounding it, the prairie has now been enclosed and domesticated: 'one looks out over a vast checker-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn'. The threatening, undifferentiated void that faced Alexandra, Carl and Emil as they made their way across the prairie and defeated John Bergson's attempts at homesteading has been transformed into a rich and 'thickly populated' agrarian landscape of 'green and brown and yellow fields' and 'gaily painted farmhouses'. In accordance with an imperial-colonial discourse that presents conquest as a liberation, Alexandra's taming of the Genius of the Divide has released the

peaceful potential of inchoate nature – land-as-wilderness: ‘the brown earth, with such strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow’.

Through its transformation along a progressive trajectory, the wild land has not simply been turned into a landscape in the sense of ‘*a composition of man-made spaces on the land*’.<sup>26</sup> More accurately, the agrarian scene at the beginning of ‘Neighboring Fields’ can be described as a landscape garden. The utopian, religious, and aesthetic connotations of this locus can be glimpsed in the ‘fertility’, ‘happiness’, and harmonious order of the landscape spectacle, but are perhaps given an even more succinct expression in a passage shortly afterwards: “[w]hen you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds’ (84). The spatial order of landscape-as-garden is not only culturally significant because of its utopian and religious allusions to, for example, paradise as an enclosed garden and ‘the lyrical rhapsody of Virgil’s fourth eclogue, “The Golden Age Returns.”’<sup>27</sup> It is also a vehicle of formal significance from the point of view of a literary geography. The ‘order and fine arrangement’ of Alexandra’s homestead alludes to imagination and a formalist sensibility necessary to compose an idealised, man-made landscape that is at once beautiful to look at and pleasing to inhabit. As if pre-figuring the modernist painter Piet Mondrian’s gridded landscape compositions, the image of the Plains as a ‘vast checker-board’ of light and dark squares also appears to perceive a formal, geometrical order beneath the muddled surface of the lived landscape. By exploring these formal and aesthetic aspects of Cather’s literary landscape in more detail, it becomes possible to demonstrate how aesthetic operations shape and colour landscape prospects and impressions in the

novel. Moreover, these may be described as imperial-colonial in a significant sense: as old-world modes of artistic representation their transfer to the Plains contribute to the reification of the pioneer landscape at the same time that they paint significant aspects of the place out of existence.

### *The Art of Landscaping*

In a recent essay on empire and migration in Cather's novels, Joseph R. Urgo writes that she 'remained throughout her adult life, an easterner, more specifically, a New Yorker'.<sup>28</sup> Urgo's observation reminds us that Cather was exiled from the region she depicts in *O Pioneers!* from a geographical, temporal, as well as a cultural point of view. The Nebraskan divide of the novel is the Plains place of the author's childhood remembered – literally in the sense of a putting back together of parts – from the vantage point of the 1910s by an urban artist of an international orientation. Several studies have demonstrated Cather's keen interest in and grasp of classical, romantic, as well as modern Western art and literature.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Cather's own critical essays also attest to her life-long interest in European art, in particular nineteenth century landscape painting and impressionism.<sup>30</sup> In her essay 'On the Art of Fiction', for example, Cather discusses her own aesthetic ideals and practices directly in relation to a number of European realist and naturalist painters from the mid-nineteenth century. Specifically, she discusses Jean-François Millet's naturalist landscape 'The Sower' (1850) and notes that

[a]ll the discarded sketches that went before made the picture what it finally became, and the process was all the time one of simplifying, of sacrificing many conceptions good in themselves for one that was better and more universal.<sup>31</sup>

Even though Cather primarily uses Millet's painting to illustrate her aesthetic ideal of the novel as *demeuble* – de-furnished – and argue that art endures 'remote and inviolable above the petty contortions of political change', 'The Sower' is nonetheless tellingly similar to *O Pioneers!* in terms of subject, motif, composition and allegorical signification.<sup>32</sup> Like the novel, it also depicts a rural subject, a young peasant labouring hard but with virtuous force in and against a rolling landscape in which the evening darkness is threatening to envelop a small area of light shining on a plough.<sup>33</sup>

The similarities between the aesthetic place-making in Cather's Plains novel and the painterly landscape tradition that Millet represents are indicative of the formal and ideational influence that the genres of the realist and impressionist landscape exerted on Cather and her narrator's appropriation of the prairie wilderness in *O Pioneers!*. In large part it is through a series of formal operations that the historical and inhabited frontier experience of the pioneer settlers is transformed into a symbolic representational space, that is, a literary landscape. As words and phrases such as 'stretch of country', 'scenes' and 'landscape' indicate these formal operations and the symbolic space they constitute are largely visual (76, 116). It is by painting with words that Cather projects the agrarian landscape-as-garden onto her literary canvas. And because this aesthetic place-making is informed and inspired by the painterly practices and techniques that Cather and her narrator borrow from European art forms, in particular the genres of realist and impressionist landscape painting, it may serve as an illuminating example of how her old-world predilections make a considerable imperial-colonial contribution to the reification of the pioneer Plains place.

### *Landscape as Prospect*

At the level of the text, the painterly influence is evident when the artistically minded and talented Carl Linstrum tells Alexandra upon his return to the Divide from New

York that “‘I’ve been away engraving other men’s pictures, and you’ve stayed at home and made your own.” He pointed with his cigar toward the sleeping landscape’ (116). The landscape in question is the idyllic spectacle depicted in the opening pages of ‘Neighbouring Fields’ (see page 80-1). Formally, this ‘scene’ illustrates how the narrator paints landscape motifs with words in the tradition of landscape as prospect, that is, a panoramic view from a vantage point depicting the man-made elements of the countryside (76). The Norwegian graveyard provides the vantage point from where ‘one looks out over’ the ‘checker-board’, ‘squares’, ‘telephone wires’, ‘roads’ and ‘right angles’. These elements of the landscape are not only indicative of the physical ‘scaping’ that the settlers have undertaken in their attempt to domesticate the prairie wilderness and create an agrarian landscape that is rich, fertile, and modern and underpinned by a rational infrastructure, telecommunications, and commerce. Their straight lines and rectilinearity also gesture towards the linear perspective of the realist landscape genre, and thus remind the reader of the shared geometrical origins of a way of seeing characteristic of both landscape painting and cartographic mapping. Again it is Carl Linstrum who points to the shared ground between painting and surveying when he refers to the Plains landscape as a ‘wide map-like prospect of field and hedge and pasture’ (108).

Formally, this way of seeing is not restricted to the central landscape motifs in ‘Neighboring Fields’ but is found throughout the novel. In the opening vista of Hanover, for example, an all-seeing eye gradually moves from a panoramic vantage point down to the level of individual inhabitants:

One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away. A mist of

fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky [...] On the sidewalk in front of one of the stores sat a little Swede boy, crying bitterly. (3-4)

Like Michel de Certeau's 'celestial eye', this gaze from nowhere is suggestive of the visual control and order as well as the authority commanded by the narrator when representing space and place throughout the novel.<sup>34</sup> From an all-seeing perspective denied the person in the street, it encompasses and represents the various elements of the budding Plains townscape along the rectilinear lines of a national spatial template drawn up and approved by planners and politicians in the East but with origins in the old world: 'The main street...ran from the squat red railway station and the grain "elevator" at the north end of the town to the lumber yard and the horse pond at the south end' (3-4).<sup>35</sup> In a similar manner, the vista in the novel's final scene also offers the reader a landscape prospect from a vantage point when Alexandra and Carl 'pause [...] on the last ridge of the pasture, overlooking the house and the windmill and the stables that marked the site of John Bergson's homestead. On every side the brown waves of earth rolled away to meet the sky' (307).

Common sense may tell us that realist landscapes offer a truthful representation of the objective spatial properties of the world outside the observing subject. Like the opening vista in 'Neighboring Fields', they organise and order these properties – the chorological elements of the landscape – along the lines of central perspective into a fore-, middle, and background towards a vanishing point, thus creating in the eyes of the viewer the illusion of three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional surface of canvas or, in the case of *O Pioneers!*, text. However, far from

being an objective representation, landscape prospects represent a way of seeing that is aesthetically and culturally specific and ideologically instrumental to the production of space and place. Accepting it as objective would merely help make a certain landscape or way of seeing 'real', or to put it in Marxist terms, naturalise what is in effect a cultural construct. Hence, the landscape prospects that mark the beginning, apex and end of the prairie novel become a further example of how the so-called new world is encompassed and represented through old-world knowledge constructs: vantage point, central and linear perspective, fore-, middle, and background are intrinsic to a way of seeing – an aesthetics – that contributes to the inscription of a certain spatial order onto the Plains wilderness of part one.

Moreover, because this spatial order is also deemed beautiful, the key landscape motifs play an important role in reifying Alexandra's home place. The 'wide map-like prospect of field and hedge and pasture' and 'the symmetrical pasture ponds' reflect 'the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm' (108, 84). Accordingly, we are told that a stranger approaching Alexandra's farm 'could not help noticing the beauty [...] of the outlying fields' (83). In addition, the inherent beauty of the spatial form and order of the landscape is complemented by a plethora of positively valenced colorations: 'gilded weather-vanes', 'big red barns', 'green and brown and yellow fields', and 'gaily painted farmhouses' (75). By painting with words in this way, the form and colour of the different man-made elements become emblematic of the harmony, beauty, industry, fertility, and wealth of the pioneer landscape. That is to say, they help reify and idealise an agrarian spatial order at the same time that they imply the disappearance of the 'ugly moods' and unfriendly genius of the pre-settlement prairie soil: 'The shaggy coat of the prairie [...] has vanished forever' (20, 75).



## *Impressionism*

The reification of the pioneer Plains place is not solely the result of depicting it according to the conventions of a realist landscape genre. This way of seeing is complemented by another European art form of the late nineteenth century, namely impressionism. It is perhaps when Cather employs her impressionist palate that she comes closest to the etymological origins of the word aesthetic, *aisthanesthai*, meaning to perceive as a sensory activity and to sense by way of feeling. The objectivity implied by the distance between observer and observed in the landscape prospects has as its opposite number the intense but fleeting subjective experience of the prairie inhabitants. Alexandra's passion and the beauty of the pioneer landscape are evoked through a series of motifs that Cather paints with a visual sensibility that is strongly impressionistic. On this aspect of her aesthetic practice she comments in *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*:

At bottom all he can give you is the thrill of his own poor little nerve – the projection in paint of a fleeting pleasure in a certain combination of form and colour, as temporary and almost as physical as a taste on the tongue. This oft-repeated pleasure in a painter becomes of course a “style”, a way of seeing and feeling things, a favourite mood.<sup>36</sup>

As the extract makes clear the emphasis is again on formal operations, on how ‘form and colour’ enables the eye of the artist to perceive, give form to, and infuse space and place with feeling and atmosphere. Technically, the scene in ‘The White Mulberry Tree’ (Part IV) when an ecstatic Emil finds Marie in the orchard is exemplary of how this impressionist style of writing is used to evoke a sense of place:

the sun was hanging low over the wheatfield. Long fingers of light reached through the apple branches as through a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light. (258)

Here light becomes reality as it dissolves the physical elements of the place. In doing so, it not only captures the dream-like quality of the couple's short-lived and tragic romance, it also brings to mind the garden idyll of the early pioneer landscape. Interspersed throughout the text, these impressionist colorations function repeatedly as lyrical evocations of pastoral idyll, for example, when Alexandra is remembered with 'a bright tin pail in either hand, and the milky light of the early morning all about her' while at the same time '[t]he pasture was flooded with light; every clump of ironweed and snow-on-the-mountain threw a long shadow, and the golden light seemed to be rippling through the curly grass like the tide racing in' (126-7).

As was the case with the landscape prospect, the transfer of a quintessentially European mode of artistic representation contributes to the positive valorisation and reification of the early pioneer landscape. In doing so, landscape and impressionist motifs form a central part of Cather's artistic attempt at lifting the remembered, inhabited prairie of the pioneers to literary expression from the temporal vantage point of 1913. Thanks to the impressionist recording of fleeting sensory experience, the landscape experience on the Divide is given form, intensity, and, paradoxically, a degree of permanence. In the context of Cather's aesthetics as set out in the comments on Millet and impressionism above, it would seem that in so far as the artistic sensibility records sensory perception and feeling truthfully, the resultant picture will

also be 'more universal' than a mere sensing of the artist's 'own poor little nerve'. By contrast, one might argue from an intercultural and historical point of view that the impressionist motifs constitute another example of an imperial transfer that helps the viewer/reader look at the prairie as a pastoral idyll while not seeing important elements of the place on the ground.

### *A Logic of Visualization*

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre refers to the kinds of realist and impressionist spatial motifs that one finds in *O Pioneers!* as 'visual formants'. In Lefebvre's analysis of how abstract mental space reduces and displaces three-dimensional natural and social space, this predominantly visual representation of space illustrates the workings of what he calls a logic of visualisation. This term implies, firstly, a metaphorical dependence on the written word and, secondly, a metonymic process of spectacularisation:

In the course of the process whereby the visual gains the upper hand over the other senses, all impressions derived from taste, smell, touch and even hearing first lose their clarity, then fade away altogether, leaving the field to line, colour and light. In this way a part of the object and what it offers comes to be taken for the whole.<sup>37</sup>

The phrase 'leaving the field to line, colour and light' echoes almost word for word Cather's observation that all the artist can hope to capture is 'the projection in paint of a fleeting pleasure in a certain combination of form and colour'. As we have seen, Cather not only reflected on and wrote about these painterly ideas and ideals, she also convincingly put them into practice as a writer. The realist and impressionist spatial

motifs discussed above demonstrate how ‘the visual gains the upper hand’ through, for example, perspective, composition, coloration, and sensory perception: ‘light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light’ (258). Likewise, it is landscape in the visual sense of prospect and spectacle that marks the successful transformation of wilderness into agrarian landscape. In encouraging the reader to take a part ‘for the whole’, this way of seeing displaces other sense impressions and modes of representation. Because of the metaphorical and metonymical operations that it performs, the abstracting logic of visualisation found in these spatial motifs obscures significant topographic, ecological, and ethnic elements of Cather’s remembered prairie. It implies, on the one hand, that if Indians cannot be seen they do not exist, while, on the other, it also contributes to the reification of the pioneer Plains place. The resultant agrarian idyll may soon be lost in *O Pioneers!*’s fictionalised history of the Nebraskan Plains, but only for it to reappear and make the place even more mythical as its re-recovery is longed and hoped for by both narrator and author. Whereas the former does so in the last lines of the novel, the latter expresses a similar sentiment in the essay, ‘Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle’ when she writes that ‘I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again’ (309).<sup>38</sup>

As I mentioned in the introduction, *O Pioneers!* is not alone in representing the prairie as a landscape garden. It shares this view with numerous other novels – as well as paintings, prints, and illustrated atlases – published at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, Ralph Connor’s *The Sky Pilot* (1899) and Arthur Stringer’s *The Prairie Wife* (1915). But as Dick Harrison argues in his study of the search for a prairie fiction, *Unnamed Country*, ‘[t]he use of this recurrent garden motif in the art and culture generally could be dismissed as

simply another way of looking at the prairie without seeing it. To some extent, the imagination is not transforming the given reality but escaping from it.’<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, Harrison is right in so far as the landscape-as-garden motifs cloud or erase important elements of the land that they are meant to depict and the socio-historical context in which it was shaped. As we shall see in the chapters on Robert Kroetsch’s *Field Notes* and William Least-Heat Moon’s *PrairieEarth*, seeing and shaping the prairie according to Euro-American notions of landscape and garden have indeed prevented settler cultures from understanding and appreciating significant aspects of the region’s topography and biome as well as the cultures that have inhabited it both prior to and after white settlement.

On the other hand, it is by transposing formal operations from a European artistic tradition that the landscape prospects of a novel like *O Pioneers!* give form to the inchoate land of Part I, the wilderness as void. Looked at from this perspective, the aesthetics of both painterly landscape prospects and impressionist motifs remind us that the imperial-colonial advance that took place on the ground had a counterpart in the art and fiction that represents and remembers it. Thus, at the same time that the imposition of a Euro-American artistic vision onto the prairie contributes to the writing out of existence of the place, it also contributes to a writing into existence. That is to say, the landscape-as-garden motif becomes a way of seeing the prairie that teaches viewers and readers how to perceive, understand and live in and with the place. By seeing and representing the prairie through the optics of visual art forms such as the landscape prospect and impressionist scenes, the novel is also, in the words of Michel de Certeau, constructing ‘the fiction that creates readers’.<sup>40</sup> And as we shall see in the next chapter, it is the commonplace tropes and narratives of this

fiction that Robert Kroetsch's field-note poetry attempts 'to violate' in order 'to penetrate the word, penetrate the image, and uncover story.'<sup>41</sup>

Before we do so, however, I intend to look more closely at *O Pioneers!*' recovery narrative in its historical context. The socio-cultural symbolism of its salient spatialising tropes seems to me to indicate an affinity with a nineteenth and early twentieth-century progressive discourse on the westward expansion of Western civilisation. Of particular interest is how Cather's account of prairie place-making relates to two prominent versions of the 'the heroic recovery narrative' at the time of its publication, the frontier theses of Frederick Jackson Turner's 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893) and Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896), and a public debate about the nature and future of American empire.<sup>42</sup> By placing Cather's literary place-making in this context, I hope to demonstrate that it does not amount to a straightforward celebration of a grand narrative of spatial recovery. At the same time that it shares significant elements with the frontier theses of Turner and Roosevelt, Cather's vision of the Midwest as an American region also departs from them in telling ways. However, it is exactly because her fiction addresses wider cultural issues that it cannot be said to take an exclusive, high-brow literary stance. As Guy Reynolds has noted, Cather has regularly been presented as a writer to whom '[a]rt and social issues (or politics, or economics) are divorced; art is akin to religion; art endures, remote and inviolable above the petty contortions of political change.'<sup>43</sup> As I have begun to show, however, the form and aesthetics of Cather's literary landscape are indeed ideological insofar as they both contribute to and critique a culturally powerful progressive mythos, which has exerted a significant influence on how the Great Plains are seen, understood, and inhabited.

### *Cather's Plains Landscape as Progressive*

To begin to explicate the ideological significance of the novel's salient spatialising tropes, it is useful to consider them in a socio-cultural context. Such a view reveals that in telling ways they are symbolic of a dominant Euro-American geo-political order. As a regional landscape of the United States, the agrarian Plains of 'Neighboring Fields' embody a vision of America as landscape and of the nation's advance westward as modern and rational, 'a vast rural grid based on an urban ordering of space' conceived and implemented by 'innovators with national outlooks'.<sup>44</sup> We find this grand, political landscape visualised and objectified in lines and phrases such as 'one looks out over a vast checker-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn', 'roads, which always run at right angles', and a 'wide map-like prospect of field and hedge and pasture' (75, 108). Despite being a local landscape settled by European immigrants, the key spatial images of *O Pioneers!* nonetheless reveal how '[t]he ideas of perspective and the rational ordering of space stand at the origins of America, [...] at the pivot of its republican ideals, in the rectangular grid of the rural landscape and the blocks and axes of Washington.'<sup>45</sup> The straight lines of roads, fields and telephone wires are material manifestations of the inscription of a grand Euro-American spatial design onto a perceived prairie void. Their linearity is a sign of the science and technology that shaped the imperial Plains region on maps (conceptually), on the page and canvas (perceptually, aesthetically) and on the ground (materially). Just as fields and roads are drawn along the lines superimposed onto the land by cartographers and planners, so the furrows in the fields are the result of the steel plough's bright shear.

In lifting this distinctly American landscape to literary expression, the novel's spatialising tropes also link it to the Enlightenment notions of progress and

improvement aided by natural science and technology, two of the cornerstones of the European colonial project. At once indebted and adding to a Western recovery narrative, Enlightenment advances in science and technology contributed both practically, symbolically and, not least, ideologically to the vision and mythos of the United States as a modern and rationally-planned and -ordered nation-state. As Carolyn Merchant notes, '[m]odern Europeans added two components to the Christian recovery project – mechanistic science and laissez-fair capitalism – to create a grand master narrative of Enlightenment.'<sup>46</sup> This narrative is also discernible in *O Pioneers!* in the way it grafts onto Virgil's classical recovery narrative a story of 'mechanistic science and laissez-faire capitalism'. For this reason, there is a distinct but sometimes overlooked sense in which the literary landscape of *O Pioneers!* is modern and progressive – albeit in an idealising manner. Looking at it from this perspective helps us make sense of the narrator's comment that '[i]t fortified her [Alexandra] to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security' (70-71).

In the context of the novel, it can even be argued that technology – Leo Marx's machine – and capitalism in the instrumental shape of ploughs, silos, 'a new kind of clover hay' and mortgages are significant means to the creation of an idealised agricultural landscape garden (64). The novel's central recovery narrative provides several examples of how mechanistic science, technology and capitalism are instrumental to the transformation of inchoate nature into an enclosed agrarian landscape and individual property: the earth 'yields itself eagerly to the plow' and is 'marked off in squares of wheat', Alexandra builds the first silo on the Divide, and she 'take[s] out two loans' on the family half-section to buy as much land as possible (76, 75, 66). This modern impulse has often been overlooked in readings of the text,



perhaps because it sits uneasily alongside Alexandra's romantic qualities and mythical act of topogenesis. The latter are, after all, not only fronted in the text but have also commonly been seized upon by critics, thus allowing them to cloud and marginalize historical and ideological particulars of the settlement process.

### *Stadialism, Social Darwinism, and Manifest Destiny*

In addition to sharing a classical narrative structure and a belief in science and technology with a powerful Western story of spatial recovery, the transformation from wilderness to landscape also shows signs of stadialism, another key feature of an American discourse that represents the spread of Western civilisation on the North American continent in linear, progressive and ascensionist terms. The relevance of reading an early twentieth century text like *O Pioneers!* through a stadialist lens stems from the fact that

American social theory in the nineteenth century grew out of Enlightenment theories about the progress of civilisations. 'Stadialism', a constellation of ideas formulated by the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers and given fictional representation in Walter Scott's novels, argued that society evolved through distinct stages: barbarian stages gave way to increasingly sophisticated cultures, agricultural then commercial, until our present-day civilisation was reached.<sup>47</sup>

In his discussion of imperial transfers in *O Pioneers!* Guy Reynolds illustrates the presence of stadialism in dominant American discourses on space and place by quoting at length Thomas Jefferson's panoramic view of the North American continent. Like the transformation from wilderness to landscape in Parts I and II of

Cather's novel, the scene depicts the gradual emergence of a civilised landscape along a progressive trajectory from savagery towards civilisation:

Let a philosophical observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our seacoast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilisation, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day.<sup>48</sup>

In *O Pioneers!* we can trace the progress of improving man, or rather woman, in Alexandra and the way her mythical place-making transforms the void of the pre-settlement prairie wilderness by transposing a Euro-American spatial order onto it. In stadialist terms, this transformation marks the relative 'progress of man' when measured against 'the waters of geological ages' and 'the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races' (65, 20). At the height of this process of improvement, the reader has before him an idyllic agrarian landscape whose defining spatial elements and order signify the progressive values of early pioneers, 'rugged figures' who, according to the author herself, 'subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie'.<sup>49</sup> The rhetoric of Cather's 1923 article, 'Nebraska: The End of the First

Cycle', from which these comments are taken, exhibits spatial tropes and a narrative structure that are strikingly similar to those of *O Pioneers!*'s recovery narrative. The article first mentions 'this neutral new world', implying in a similar way to the novel the absence of a pre-settlement landscape and the presence of a void or a tabula rasa. To make this void placeful, it not only goes on to depict how the pioneers 'subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie' but also how, in the process, the 'cultivated fields and broken land seemed mere scratches in the brown running steppe...' Finally, as is the case in 'Neighboring Fields', a spatial metaphor marks the successful completion of the transformation from wilderness and void into landscape: 'The whole State is a farm.'<sup>50</sup>

A comparative reading of the histories of space and place recounted in *The Nation* article in 1923 and the 1913 novel leaves the reader with the impression that stadialist notions of gradual progress informed the author's literary geographies of the Great Plains for a period of at least ten years. From an ideological point of view, it is interesting to note how the journal article also reifies an agrarian pioneer landscape that marks the closing of the frontier. It does so not only through its description of the progressive development of Nebraska into a farming state, but also in the way the pioneer settlers are said to embody values that 'inspire respect, compel admiration.' Cather writes that their 'attainment of material prosperity was a moral victory because it was wrung from hard conditions, was the result of a struggle that tested character.'<sup>51</sup> In fact, on the last point the article appears to express a view akin to natural selection as found in the writing of social Darwinists.<sup>52</sup> It describes the depression on the Nebraskan plains from 1893 to 1897 as 'years of trial' and their effect upon the pioneers as 'salutary' because

[t]hey winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents who are seeking a land where man does not live by the sweat of his brow. The slack farmer moved on. Superfluous banks failed [...] The strongest stock survived, and within ten years those who had weathered the storm came into their reward.<sup>53</sup>

A similar belief in the survival of the strongest stock can be identified in Alexandra and the place-making she undertakes. Her idealised pioneer character is destined to survive and succeed in the struggle with the ‘old wild country’ in which ‘so many men broke their hearts and died’ (78, 20). Among these lesser men the novel counts her father who ‘made little impression upon the wild land’, the Linstrums who sell up and move back east to St. Louis, and ‘[a]ll the Americans [who] are skinning out’ (50, 58). Elsewhere she tries to persuade her brothers to stay on the Divide during the years of hardship by arguing that ‘[o]ur people were better than these in the old country’ (68). The people in question are the European and American neighbours of the Scandinavian immigrant family. Because Alexandra’s character embodies certain beliefs that are best described as social Darwinist, Cather’s fictionalised history of the Nebraskan Plains converges surprisingly with certain tenets put forward by Theodore Roosevelt in his frontier thesis, *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896).

Whereas the other prominent frontier thesis, Turner’s ‘The Significance of the Frontier’, presents the ‘agents of historical achievement...not [as] the great captains and men of daring exploit but the small entrepreneurs, artisans, and farmers, the little men in their average and aggregate’, *O Pioneers!* portrays Alexandra as a ‘triumphant kind of person’ who rises above Turner’s collective ‘hero’ and masters space by subduing the wilderness through an act of heroic topogenesis (302).<sup>54</sup> In doing so, she

resembles more closely Roosevelt's 'successive classes of heroes emerging from the strife of races to earn a neo-aristocratic right to rule.'<sup>55</sup> In a gendered and hence politically subversive appropriation of Roosevelt's 'best men', Cather's 'best woman' is portrayed as being individually rather than collectively minded and not afraid to challenge the common man's dogmatic and conventional thinking and fear of change, which dictates 'for all to do alike' (92).

However, Alexandra's right to tame and transform wilderness is not directly related to the type of racial strife that features centrally in Roosevelt's social Darwinist frontier thesis.<sup>56</sup> In place of racial strife, the novel introduces strife with the land, which, as I discussed in the first part of this chapter, is represented using traditional imperial-colonial tropes of struggle, defeat, conquest, liberation, and triumph. As the Plains Indians have already vanished along with most traces of their cultures, the Bergsons are left to struggle with another 'other', namely land perceived as 'bewildering' and 'wild' (20, 19). It is through this liberation struggle that the noble and heroic character of both protagonist and land is formed in a manner not dissimilar to the one employed by Roosevelt in his portrayal of his best men: Alexandra's rule is legitimised by a kind of natural law insofar as it is her natural affiliation with the land that makes her better suited than anyone else to gain the consent of her subject, i.e. the land, whose spirit subsequently bends 'lower than it ever bent to a human will before' (65).<sup>57</sup>

The presence of stadialist and social Darwinist traces is indicative of how key spatialising tropes of the novel are at once informed by and negotiating the cluster of ideas that had accumulated around the term 'frontier' at the beginning of the twentieth century. Due in no small measure to the frontier theses of Turner and Roosevelt, its representation of the westward advance of Western civilisation as progressive and

inevitable and the resultant American nation as unique and exceptional may be considered an always already discourse at the time Cather wrote *O Pioneers!*. A related and equally influential idea from this cluster is the notion of Manifest Destiny. This ideologically important term may not have come into wide-spread circulation until it was coined by Democrat John O'Sullivan in 1845, but its assumption of inevitable and just territorial expansion can be traced as far back as the puritans. Insofar as it represented pioneering as a defining national and imperial mission, Manifest Destiny also exerted a powerful influence upon America's imperial ambitions at home and abroad during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> In *O Pioneers!* we see the formative frontier experience of Manifest Destiny re-enacted as key spatialising tropes delineate a transformation of a wilderness void into a rich and fertile regional landscape. In this regard, the novel's turning of space into place is part of a defining imperial and national mission. However, an even clearer symbolic indication that a manifest destiny is present in the novel can be found in the image of 'a big white house that stood on a hill, several miles across the fields' (83). With its echoes of John Winthrop's 'city upon a hill', the image becomes an emblem of a successful errand in the wilderness in a similar way to the garden motif that appears immediately afterwards:

When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, [...] You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best. (84)<sup>59</sup>

The inevitability of this type of spatial progress is hinted at when Alexandra's struggle with the 'old wild country' is portrayed as one in which she 'was *destined* to succeed' and when she is described as 'a triumphant kind of person' (78, my italics, 302). The sense of destiny and inevitability is further corroborated by Alexandra's idealised pioneer character and the historiographical meta-narrative that structures the text's account of the closing of the prairie frontier. Interestingly, the latter draws on the geo-historiographies of Virgil and Jules Michelet, two European historians of empire who view history as cyclical and depict the rise and fall of empires as a series of inevitable ascensions and declensions. As we shall see, so does *O Pioneers!*, but after the fall from the garden state, a number of tropes and scenes puts the reified landscape of the first settlers to ideological use to offer hope of its re-recovery in the future. Indeed, it is largely because of the position and special value of this landscape within the overall narrative that it makes sense to analyse it in relation to such ideologically charged terms as progressivism, stadialism, social Darwinism, and Manifest Destiny.

From an imperial-colonial perspective, then, Alexandra's homesteading may be said to illustrate what Amy Kaplan has called 'the double meaning of "domestic" as both the space of the nation and of the familial household and [...] how these notions are inextricably intertwined with shifting notions of foreign.'<sup>60</sup> In the novel, notions of foreign are primarily represented by land-as-wilderness, 'that land', and the pre-settlement Native American inhabitants (65). Moreover, by showing how 'the representation of domesticity and female subjectivity simultaneously contributed to and were enabled by narratives of nation and empire building', Kaplan's study persuasively argues that female domesticity and male Manifest Destiny are interrelated insofar as they both contribute to the imagining of the nation as home and

the home as national.<sup>61</sup> To a significant extent, I believe, the same can be said for Alexandra's home, her 'great farm', in 'Neighboring Fields' (84).

By considering the agrarian landscape at the beginning of 'Neighboring Fields' from a socio-cultural and discursive point of view, I have shown that figuratively and narratively Cather's fictionalised history of the Plains is both informed by and contributes to a culturally powerful meta-narrative of spatial recovery. *O Pioneers!* shares important tropes, motifs, and narrative structures with this progressive narrative which rose to prominence during the nineteenth century. We find it expressed variously in the writings of, for example, Jefferson, Emerson, Turner, and Roosevelt and in the landscape paintings of well-known artists such as John Gast and Thomas Cole. In an article entitled 'The Young American', Emerson succinctly sets out this vision of a progressive national, including prairie, landscape:

This great savaged land should be furrowed by the plough, and combed by the harrow; these rough Alleghanies should know their master; these foaming torrents should be bestridden by proud arches of stone; these wild prairies should be loaded with wheat; the swamps with rice; the hill-tops should pasture innumerable sheep and cattle [...] How much better when the whole land is a garden, and the people have grown up in the bowers of a paradise."<sup>62</sup>

Again, the basic figurative and narrative pattern follows a transformation of 'savaged land' and 'wild prairies' into an agrarian breadbasket 'loaded with wheat'. As the change in verbal form from modal to declarative signals, the subtext of Emerson's recovery narrative is that the settlers not only should but inevitably will improve and



replenish wilderness in accordance with the teleological aims of a grand narrative of space and place. In a similar way, the improvement of the wild land in *O Pioneers!* naturalises, legitimises, and mythologises prairie settlement by voiding and attaching negative valence to the pre-settlement landscape and juxtaposing it with the positive troping and valencing of Alexandra's act of topogenesis and the agrarian landscape that subsequently emerges. As we have seen, central images of this process of place-making embody ideas and values that are also found in a progressive meta-narrative of spatial recovery common to the United States and an American sense of place. However, despite being inextricably linked to this culturally powerful discourse formation, Cather's literary Plains place nonetheless departs from Turner and Roosevelt's influential frontier versions of it in significant ways.

*Euro-American: the hybridity of O Pioneers!'s imperial landscape*

Even though Cather's literary Plains place shares significant elements with an American recovery narrative, it also differentiates itself from prominent contemporary versions of this overarching national story. In particular, it does so by bearing overtly the marks of and valuing European forms of spatial organisation and attachment. The text repeatedly signals the positive value of cross-cultural transfers from the old world. Twice the Divide is likened to fertile agrarian regions of central and southern Europe, 'the wheat-lands of middle France' and 'the plains of Lombardy' (211, 76). In addition, it also displays signs of a Nordic or Germanic attachment to land that is not just concerned with ownership or indeed aesthetics but with blood bonds and spiritual inhabitation. We first learn of such a relationship when we are told that Alexandra's father 'had the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable' (21). He values land, in other words, not just as property but also as a source of identity, a locus or matter that gives its inhabitants a substantial sense of belonging and being

rooted in the soil. The tropes through which this rooting is depicted signal a natural attachment to and oneness with the land, thus alluding to a nativism that is more medieval and European than modern and American. Here I once again have in mind images and metaphors such as ‘her [Alexandra] heart [...] hiding down there’, and ‘days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her body the joyous germination in the soil’ (71, 203). The result, as Carl tells Alexandra towards the end of the novel, is that “[y]ou belong to the land [...] Now more than ever.” (307). Moreover, Alexandra also makes reference to the import of an old-world blood attachment to place in maintaining a sense of belonging when she says she hopes that her deceased father has returned to and ‘is among the old people of his blood and country’ (183).

Other noteworthy transfers from the old world to the pioneer prairie include ethnic traits and habits. In terms of how the novel represents the Plains as an American region, it is significant that the landscape incorporates these elements unproblematically. Swedes, Bohemians, Norwegians, and Frenchmen live peacefully side by side in seemingly multi-cultural harmony on the Nebraskan tableland. This *Volkish* co-habitation means that the different settler colonies are able to preserve old-world ethnic practices and customs pertaining to language, religion, food, and agriculture in the new world. In the text, these manifest themselves in the form of Swedish words such as ‘dotter’ and imitations of Swedish accents, “‘No, yust las night I ma-ake...’” (25, 191). Likewise, references to ‘the Norwegian Church’, ‘the Reform Church’, and ‘the Catholic Church, locally known as “the French Church”’ suggest religious diversity and tolerance (188). Finally, in a scene of warming domesticity in the ‘iron country’ that is the prairie in winter, Alexandra and Mrs. Lee

celebrate Marie's rolls and cakes by declaring that the Bohemians 'certainly know how to make more kinds of bread than any other people in the world' (187, 194).

Just as the wilderness-landscape juxtaposition described in the first part of this chapter dates back to medieval Europe, so these transfers demonstrate how the 'scaping' of the land involves the successful transfer of old-world forms of spatial organisation and inhabitation. The result is an ethnically and culturally diverse colonial landscape that, to an extent, counters the exceptionalism, uniqueness and homogeneity advocated in the frontier theses of Turner and Roosevelt. The novel does not celebrate American progressivism as exceptional in the way that Turner's frontier thesis does when it claims that the pioneer 'transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe...Here is a new product that is American.'<sup>63</sup> Nor does it subscribe to Roosevelt's view in his speech, 'The World Movement' in which he declared American empire the culmination of a process of civilisation and stated that 'the present civilization can be compared to nothing that has ever gone before.'<sup>64</sup> On the contrary, if viewed from the point of view of a literary geography, the strong European influence demonstrates that claims of a unique American landscape divorced from Europe are factually and fundamentally flawed. The text repeatedly insists that the value of this 'new' American product derives largely from it retaining the 'old'. To a significant extent, the text's imperial-colonial landscape takes its lead from Mrs. Bergson's attempt 'to reconstruct her old life in so far as that was possible' (30).

In the context of a discourse on American empire, this salient European presence would seem to leave Cather's literary Plains in a somewhat ambiguous position. Even though it seeks to distance itself from certain aspects of a dominant American narrative of spatial recovery, it nonetheless remains inextricably linked to

this mythos. So far we have seen, for example, how the narrative values spatial recovery, progress, and improvement; individual talent, freedom, enterprise, and heroism; and the benefits of science, technology, and capitalism in creating a new-world home. Thus, if we take into account the presence of old- as well as new-world components, the novel's literary landscape is best described as a hybrid that cannot be said to subvert or displace the dominant recovery meta-narrative. Rather it contributes to and celebrates a Euro-American rather than a uniquely or exceptionally American version of it. A passage on the heroine of *My Ántonia* in a recent article by Jean C. Griffith on race and gender in Cather's prairie novels usefully illustrates the complex and ambiguous relationship that exists between *O Pioneers!*'s version of an American frontier mythos and the author's preference for old-world retentions:

Cather's new-immigrant woman becomes a testament to Old-World retentions and to their importance to the pioneer past. So just as Cather draws upon the rhetoric of fragmented white races, as did the eugenicists, to refute both nativism and prejudice against new immigration, she likewise taps into the largely male-dominated mythos of a heroic pioneer past to place women squarely within it.<sup>65</sup>

To explicate the ideological implications of occupying a position of concurrent departure from and adherence to this culturally powerful narrative, it is worthwhile once again to look at the novel's landscape from an intercultural perspective of imperial-colonial inquiry. It is interesting to note, first of all, that it is based on the racial and ethnic make-up of Cather's Plains novels that Guy Reynolds has recently suggested that their landscapes are characterised by 'diversity and pluralism' and

represent 'less a clash than a cross-fertilization among the nations of the West.' In Reynolds' reading, Cather views 'Nebraska within a series of imperial foundations and migrations' which gives her 'historical distance on her homeland' and establishes 'synoptic knowledge as the basis of the novelist's art.' It is, he argues, because of 'this wider, comparative perspective' that Cather, the artist, was able to understand and depict her remembered pioneer prairie as racially and culturally diverse.<sup>66</sup> In the context of a domestic debate about the past and future direction of American empire, this pluralist argument not only counters accusations of parochialism, provincialism, and 'local colour', but also the rhetoric of exceptionalism and homogenisation that can be found in nationalist and nativist recovery narratives such as those of Turner and Roosevelt.

However, the argument for 'cross-fertilization among the nations of the West' and 'diversity and pluralism' is itself problematic if we consider the voiding of the pre-settlement landscape and cultures that takes place in 'The Wild Land'. Despite having only recently disappeared from the point of view of the period the novel covers and the time of narration, the landscape and the Plains Indians are nonetheless either absent or reduced, as mentioned previously, to insignificant 'feeble scratches' and 'prehistoric races' (19-20). Even if we acknowledge hierarchical differences between the various settler groups, this voiding points to a telling state of affairs: the cultures that co-exist peacefully and in harmony on the prairies of *O Pioneers!* are ethnically and racially the same.<sup>67</sup> It is a case of white Europeans inhabiting a Euro-American landscape.

The voiding and negative troping of the region's pre-settlement peoples and cultures is not restricted to *O Pioneers!* but applies also to other Cather novels such as *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*. Along with other parts of this 'unsettled' landscape such

as buffalos and prairie tallgrasses, they are repeatedly marginalized, silenced, or absent when the novels tell the story of the emergence of a Euro-American agrarian landscape on the continent's central grasslands. Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*, for example, explains to Ántonia that the snake they encounter in the prairie garden of their childhood 'must have been there when the white men first came, left on from buffalo and Indian times' (MA, 52). Here the pioneer Plains place is again presented as a garden while the snake of the fall is associated with the wilderness of 'buffalo and Indian times'. Hence it is all the more poignant when Jim kills the snake. What is more, the relative insignificance of 'buffalo and Indian times' is not only signalled by the very limited treatment this period receives in the novel. Jim's remark, for example, is made in an appended subordinate clause while a phrase such as 'left on' confirms the snake's status as a relic and implies that times, i.e. history, have moved on naturally in accordance with the kind of Virgilian nature-to-nation historiography that structures the plot of Cather's first major prairie novel.

Adding further to the notion that the pre-settlement landscape is vanishing, other traces of Native American cultures are barely visible in *My Ántonia*: '...there was, [...] faintly marked in the grass, a great circle where the Indians used to ride. Jake and Otto were sure that when they galloped round that ring the Indians tortured prisoners, bound to a stake in the center;' (MA, 70). While the first half of this extract depicts Native American culture as vanishing in keeping with a common historical belief at the time, the second half portrays the prairie Indians as stereotypically wild and savage.<sup>68</sup> This, in effect, amounts to a demonising 'othering', which, in addition to serving a dramatic function, not only helps ensure the positive valence of the settler culture but also diminishes the loss to civilised society caused by the disappearance of the area's previous inhabitants. Even though it may be argued that the image is simply

used to illustrate Jake and Otto's somewhat naïve penchant for popular frontier romance and does not reflect the narrator nor the author's view of Indians, it remains problematic in so far as it is not contradicted elsewhere in this or any of Cather's other Plains novels. In fact, it may be seen to make a serious historiographical point inadvertently in that it illustrates the effect of popular cultural products such as dime novels and Wild West shows upon the public perception of the prairie region.

In *A Lost Lady* Mrs. Forrester does show some sympathy towards Native Americans when she tells Niel Herbert that through his investment schemes Ivy Peters 'gets splendid land from the Indians some way, for next to nothing. Don't tell your uncle; I've no doubt it's crooked', before adding, 'I don't admire people who cheat Indians. Indeed I don't!'" (ALL, 123 & 124). The last comment may be intended to shore up Mrs. Forrester morally while she is being forced to act pragmatically and out of necessity in the face of Peters' greedy and crassly materialist takeover of the Forrester's old West place. Even so, it remains ironic that she should express sympathy for the Indians that Peters deceives whereas the Plains Indians who had to make way for her husband's imperial-colonial projects – the building of railways, towns, banks and mines – are hardly mentioned in the story.

These examples of how Native American peoples and the landscapes they inhabited are presented as absent, vanishing, accidental victims of history, or demonised others mark the limits of any claims to pluralism, diversity, and cross-fertilisation on the literary prairies of *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady*. Moreover, the troping of the pre-settlement landscape also offers clues that the story of the origins of the pioneer place remains imperial-colonial in a fundamental sense: it must somehow reduce, marginalise or erase salient elements of the landscape and history that went before it to make space for the transfer of a Western – in this case a

Euro-centric American – spatial order. Indirectly, the key spatialising images raise the question of what happens to people, places, and events that are not compatible with the notion of spatial history as in some sense progressive or the ideas and values that white settlement cultures attach to this space in order to turn it into a cherished place.

*Not So Progressive After All? Imperial historiographies in a local Plains place*

The idea of the history of space/place told in *O Pioneers!* as progressive leads to the final imperial-colonial transfer to be covered in this chapter. It concerns the historiographies or meta-narratives that inform the fictionalised history of the Nebraskan tableland in Cather's novel. The fact that the agrarian landscape at the opening of 'Neighboring Fields' does not mark the end point of a linear transformation may be put forward as an argument against reading the novel's narrative as straightforwardly progressive in the context of an American discourse on recovery. The fall from the pastoral landscape-as-garden state is represented most dramatically by the death of Alexandra's younger brother Emil and his Bohemian lover Marie in Part IV, 'The White Mulberry Tree'. More prosaically, but historically more accurately, the fall can also be attributed to the dispute between Alexandra and her brothers Lou and Oscar over ownership of the homestead once she lets it be known that she intends to marry Carl Linstrum, a man of little means.

Symbolically, the tragic outcome of Marie and Emil's romance signifies a loss of youthful passion and innocence. Their death in the orchard at the hands of Marie's jealous husband Frank extinguishes the youthful passion that fuelled Alexandra's transformation of wilderness into garden. The central importance of youthful fervour, desire and strength to pioneering place-making is set out plainly in the poem 'Prairie Spring', which serves as a prologue to the novel. In the poem we find land juxtaposed with '...Youth,/Flaming like the wild roses,/Singing like the larks over the plowed



fields,/ flashing like a star out of the twilight; Youth with its insupportable sweetness,/ Its fierce necessity,/ Its sharp desire,...'

After the narrative fall in Part IV, the novel's final part, 'Alexandra', sees an experienced and resigned Alexandra reflecting on man's relationship to the land. She has come to realise that in the grand scheme of history's ascensions and declensions people's place-making efforts are inconsequential in comparison to those of time and the land itself: 'The land belongs to the future, Carl; [...] I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother's children. We come and go but the land is always here' (308). These lines towards the very end of the novel contradict previous depictions of heroic human agency and resonate instead with a geographical and historical determinism reminiscent of that expressed by Alexandra when she explains the transformation from wilderness to landscape with the words, 'the land did it [...] all at once. it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still' (116).

In a study of literary place-making on the prairies, the narrative fall and the recurrent element of geographical and historical determinism are interesting because they link a local and regional history to the grand narratives of Virgil and Jules Michelet's imperial histories.<sup>69</sup> Structurally and ideationally, the history of the Divide bears the marks of the geo-historiographies of Virgil's eclogues, which chart the rise and fall of Roman empire, and Michelet's *Histoire de France* (1833-67), which seeks to explain the development of France into a unified nation and the course of the country's imperial history. As Guy Reynolds has noted, Cather drew on a number of Michelet's ideas during her exploration of the course and direction of American empire. Among the formative ideas present in the account of Euro-American settlement in *O Pioneers!* are, as we have just seen, the French Enlightenment

historian's axiom that over time 'mere geography becomes history' and his notion of history as cyclical. The latter idea is of course also formative in Virgil's eclogues and their account of the development of nature into nation followed by a return to death and chaos.

Because Cather's narrative follows the cyclical logic of Virgil's classical and Michelet's Enlightenment historiographies quite closely and suggests that geography shapes social space, a case can be made for it as a grand, a-historical narrative of a local place. The particular events and actions that shape the Divide are subject to the laws and logic of time and space; the inevitable cyclical movements of history and 'the great fact' of the land itself. Not only does the land belong to the future and cannot be willed, but as Carl Linstrum says and Alexandra later confirms: 'there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before' (119, 307). Structuring and explaining spatial history from this detached and determinist perspective, however, brings with it a risk of obscuring and reducing the significance of the culturally specific and historically contingent social, political, and economic events and forces that greatly influenced the shaping of the Midwest. (As I have pointed out repeatedly, traces of these can be found in the inhabited place and actions of the settlers beneath the idealising gloss that *O Pioneers!* puts on early prairie settlement.) Moreover, in addition to reducing the significance of Alexandra's place-making, the geo-historiographical determinism that structures the narrative also contributes to her melancholy resignation: 'the people who love it [the land] and understand it are the people who own it – for a little while'" (308).

In the context of a debate about the history and direction of an American nation and its regions, Alexandra and the narrator's reflections on the ascensions and

declensions of history are indicative of the author's critical stance towards certain nativist versions of progressivism. In contrast, for example, to Roosevelt's exceptionalist America, the novel's transatlantic, agrarian landscape does not mark the triumphant heights of American civilisation in a global, historical context nor a utopian end-point of history. The zenith of Cather's spatial history is followed by a fall in accordance with the cyclical nature of the geo-historiographical models that she imports from the old world in order to structure her new-world story. This departure in terms of plot does not make her literary Plains place anti-imperial, however, but rather a variation on an essentially imperial-colonial narrative. It is, after all, the cyclical nature that enables the narrator to articulate the hope that the attributes, qualities and values that Alexandra Bergson and the pioneer landscape embody may one day be recovered: 'Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!' (309).

Despite the inevitable ups and downs of history, the rhetoric of recovery and essentialist placial rooting in the last lines of the novel still ends up lending support to the main argument put forward here, namely that the progressive recovery narrative of Part I and II does form the ideational fulcrum of the text's fictionalised history of the Plains. In the context of the overall narrative, it is the best of the earliest settlers that embody the values, beliefs, and practices necessary to transform wilderness into a landscape garden. Moreover, because the literary representation of this topos rests on a series of reifying imperial-colonial transfers, in particular positively charged spatial imagery and narrative structuring devices, the novel remains 'clearly invested in master narratives of Western cultural dominance and white superiority.'<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to note, finally, that the reification of the ideas, values, and practices of the

prairie pioneers and the hope of their recovery is not restricted to Cather's early literary Plains place but can also be found in her later fictional and non-fictional writing on Euro-American settlement in the region. *A Lost Lady*, for example, laments the vanishing of Daniel Forrester's 'glorious' pioneer dream while in the essay 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle' the author writes that 'I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again.'<sup>71</sup>

In significant ways, then, *O Pioneers!* encompasses 'this neutral new world' through the transfer of old-world knowledge constructs.<sup>72</sup> An additional clue to how this is done can be found in the fact that Cather also concluded in accordance with Jules Michelet's *Histoire de France* that '[t]he nation whose centralization is the most perfect, is likewise that which, by its example, and by the energy of its action, has done most to forward the centralization of the world.'<sup>73</sup> With its allusion to the spatial homogenisation and centralization that resulted from the state-sponsored, grid-like territorialisation of the prairies, this quotation further illustrates the ambiguity of Cather's progressive and imperial Plains landscape. At the same time that it displays a degree of ethnic and cultural pluralism and heterogeneity, it also shows overt signs of the spatial centralisation, uniformity, and homogenisation that make the Plains a landscape synonymous with American empire. The text does so, for example, when it tropes the Divide as a 'wide, map-like prospect', 'a vast checker-board, marked off in squares...' and admires 'the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm' (108, 75, 84). Through these spatialising tropes we are not only able to trace with Michel de Certeau 'Michelet's Enlightenment historiography back to the Renaissance project of encompassing the New World through knowledge' but also

how this knowledge is transferred to and operates in Cather's new-world literary geography.<sup>74</sup>

The figures in question signal a rational ordering of space and a certain way of seeing the prairie, which, as mentioned previously, can be traced back through the Enlightenment to Renaissance developments in cartography and pictorial art. To view the Plains as a 'map-like prospect' or 'a vast checker-board' requires the kind of visual sensibility and logic that Alberti and Brunelleschi's formulated with their rediscovery of linear perspective, and which was subsequently applied in the disciplines of cartography and landscape painting.<sup>75</sup> As scholars such as Denis Cosgrove and Benedict Anderson have demonstrated, both realist landscape painting and cartography played a significant part in imaging and imagining the so-called new world. In an appendix – 'Census, Map, Museum' – in a revised edition of *Imagined Communities* Anderson explains that the cartographic map does not only draw geopolitical boundaries that clearly demarcate one nation's territory from another. It also possesses a horizontal dimension which enables the observer to imagine a flat and shared national space in which inhabitants live side-by-side in seeming democratic equality much in the way that the groups of European settlers on the Divide do. Read in this way, maps have a discursive function which does not so much depict as project and hence help people imagine the space they inhabit and the communities they are part of. Quoting the Thai historian, Thongchai Winichakul, Anderson explains that

[a] map anticipated spatial reality, not vice versa. In other words, a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent [...] It had become a real instrument to concretise projections on the earth's surface.<sup>76</sup>

A similar projective argument applies to the idealised landscape of Cather's novel and its expression of a hope of a return of the beliefs, values, and practices that enabled the pioneers to turn inchoate wilderness into agrarian landscape. As Guy Reynolds has argued, the pioneer prairie represents a case of 'innovative nostalgia', 'a simultaneous retrospective and proleptic envisaging of America.'<sup>77</sup> Reynolds makes this argument in the context of a wider cultural debate about the post-frontier direction of America that was taking place at the time the novel was first published.<sup>78</sup> The nostalgia of Cather's remembered landscape is innovative, he contends, because it serves as a model for a twentieth-century America that is ethnically and culturally pluralist and varied as opposed to mono-cultural and homogenised. In a modification of Reynolds's multi-cultural reading, I want to end this chapter by suggesting that the nostalgia of the remembered Plains place cannot be described as straightforwardly innovative. Looking at the text's representation of place, it is equally apparent that the 'various grain' of its Nebraskan 'fields' bears distinct traces of the type of nostalgia that Renato Rosaldo labels 'imperialist'.<sup>79</sup>

### *Imperialist Nostalgia*

Because it is a remembered place and because of the way it is remembered, the Euro-American Plains depicted in *O Pioneers!* display a significant element of what Renato Rosaldo identifies as 'imperialist nostalgia' in *Culture and Truth*.<sup>80</sup> In her study of manifestations of nostalgia in modernist exilic travel writing, Caren Kaplan explains that Rosaldo identifies in his 'investigation of representational violence in modern nostalgia' a 'cultural expression of dominance' that he describes as imperialist.<sup>81</sup> According to Rosaldo's cultural analysis, nostalgia involves a painful but seemingly innocent return home as suggested by 'the Greek nostos, a return home, and algos, a

painful condition'.<sup>82</sup> But, he warns, the innocent surface of imperialist nostalgia 'masks aggressive impulses' because it<sup>83</sup>

revolves around a paradox: A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim. In more attenuated form, somebody deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. At one remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination.<sup>84</sup>

When I discussed Cather's visual aesthetics earlier, I mentioned Joseph Uργο's observation that the adult author was an easterner and a New Yorker who was exiled from the place she returns to in *O Pioneers!*. However, the urban Cather was not only distanced or displaced from Nebraska in time and space – historically and geographically – but also in cultural and artistic terms. Her international and cosmopolitan outlook brought her into contact with a wide range of European and Euro-American art forms, including classicism, romanticism, realist landscape painting, impressionism, and, increasingly throughout her career, modernism.

It is when we adopt this exilic point of view that we can see how the artist makes a nostalgic return home in the case of her first Plains novel. Through the operations of memory, imagination, and aesthetics, she recaptures a pioneer landscape that is vanishing from the historical present of the 1910s and represents it in idealised form as originary and rooted, and its place-making protagonist as heroic and mythic. But unlike modernist writing in which imperialist nostalgia commonly involves a

‘longing to salvage an imagined pristine pre-colonial culture by the same agents of empire – missionaries, anthropologists, travel writers – who have had a hand in destroying it’, *O Pioneers!* does not attempt to recover the landscape of the Plains Indians. On the contrary, their landscape is voided, marginalized, and ascribed negative valence as part of an effort to salvage and celebrate the landscape, qualities and values of the first wave of European settlers. In either case, however, the representational practices of imperialist nostalgia ‘disavow [...] the history of violence that yokes the past to the present, as in Hank Morgan’s longing for the “Lost Land” of Camelot, which he destroys at the end of *Connecticut Yankee*.’<sup>85</sup>

In *O Pioneers!*’s placial narrative the disavowal of a history of violence takes place through ‘representational violence’. By depicting the pre-settlement landscape as a natural ‘wilderness’ and the cultural contribution of its inhabitants as ‘feeble scratches’ and ‘indeterminate’, the text not only voids salient elements of a cultural landscape and a local ecology, it also reduces the significance of the historical violence that preceded and accompanied Euro-American settlement on the prairies (19-20).<sup>86</sup> In addition, by voiding the prairies in this way, the text also makes space for and legitimises a process of place-making which culminates in Alexandra’s mythic act of topogenesis towards the end of ‘The Wild Land’ and the emergence of an idealised landscape spectacle at the beginning of ‘Neighboring Fields’. It presents, in other words, imperial conquest – the transformation from wilderness to landscape – as a benign liberation rather than the result of subjugation, removal, war, cultural dominance, and the effects of unequal power relations in the realms of, for example, politics, law, and economics.<sup>87</sup> It is through this process of naturalisation, then, that the novel’s fictionalised history of place ‘masks aggressive impulses’ and conceals, perhaps inadvertently, its ‘complicity with often brutal domination’. Following this



line of inquiry, it can be argued, therefore, that its representation of space and place amounts to a cultural expression of dominance in relation to landscaping as it took place on the ground.

If we look at the text from the level of trope as well as the point of narration, it is also possible to identify ‘a pose of innocent yearning’ in *O Pioneers!*’s placial narrative. Alexandra’s act of topogenesis at the end of part one is presented almost literally as a case of innocent desire: ‘a human face was set toward it [land] with love and yearning’ (65). Likewise towards the end of the novel, the narrator expresses a seemingly innocuous hope of a return of the reified pioneer landscape and the qualities that brought it about: ‘[f]ortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!’ (309). As I noted earlier, this hope of recovery Cather also expresses in an essay on Nebraska’s early history published in *The Nation* in 1923, some ten years after she had had her first Plains novel published, but at the same time that the final novel of her Plains trilogy, *A Lost Lady*, appeared. In the essay she writes that ‘I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again.’<sup>88</sup> Considering the ten-year gap between the first and last of her Plains novels, it would appear that the pioneers, their values, beliefs, and the landscape they wrestled from the seeming wilderness maintained its reified status in the author’s imagined geography of the prairie as an American region for a period of at least ten years.

In addition, a similar pose of innocent yearning can also be found in the imperialist nostalgia manifest in *A Lost Lady* when Captain Forrester reflects on how the West was won:

"Because," he roused himself from his abstraction and looked about at the company, "because a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean, is already an accomplished fact. All our great West has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader's and the prospector's and the contractor's. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water. All these things will be every-day facts to the coming generation, but to us – "Captain Forrester ended with a sort of grunt. Something forbidden had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians. (ALL, 51)

In this extract the passing of the glory days of pioneering brings with it the melancholy of an elegy. The turning of dream into 'every-day facts' stirs a nostalgic impulse, a longing to revisit the days of early pioneering. Intriguingly, in articulating this longing the text equates Daniel Forrester's loss to the loss suffered by Indians imagined as a vanishing race. This is ironic, of course, because the losses suffered by Indian cultures were to a large extent the result of homesteaders, prospectors, contractors, and railroads realising their 'dreams'. Here again, in a seemingly innocent pose, imperialist nostalgia idealises and valorises the early days of pioneering. But in telling this progressive story of American empire, the history of the landscape inhabited by the Plains Indians once again remains largely absent despite the fact that it yokes an immediate past of violence, subjugation, and removal to the historical present of the narrative.

As my reading of *O Pioneers!* and *A Lost Lady* suggests, we repeatedly encounter a desire triggered by the loss of an imagined idyll, a mythic first place, in Cather's Plains novels. As subsequent attempts at retrieving this place illustrate,

nostalgia does not simply mean a painful return home; it is imperial in that its remembering and re-presentation of place – its putting it back together and forward in literary form – occludes significant costs of the domination involved in the United States' imperial advance westward. For this reason, the literary geographies examined in this chapter serve as examples of how, in the words of Amy Kaplan, 'in the history of U.S. imperialism, [...] colonialism and anticolonialism, nation-building and empire-building joined together in geographic dominion over Native Americans'.<sup>89</sup> And, one might add, significant elements of the land that was being mapped and territorialized in- as well as outside fiction.

By elucidating the presence of imperial nostalgia in Cather's prairie novel, we can thus see with greater clarity how claims of pluralism, diversity, and 'cross-fertilization among the nations of the West' are effectively confined to superior white cultures, in particular European agrarian cultures. In the context of *O Pioneers!* landscape and garden are emblems of a Western European civilisation that is fertile, rich, and beautiful to inhabit and behold. From a spatial point of view, these emblems are imperial-colonial in so far as they occlude significant elements of the pre-settlement biome, topography, and cultures as well as the process of settlement itself when they are transposed onto North America's central grasslands. It is finally for this reason that I propose that Cather's first prairie novel displays elements of what Elizabeth Ammons refers to as her 'Europhilia' and 'attraction to empire' in a reading of a short story that the author wrote late in life, 'The Old Beauty' (1936).<sup>90</sup>

It is interesting to note, furthermore, that in the case of Cather's Midwestern landscapes pluralism appears to be static in Horace Kallen's sense of distinct and autonomous ethno-racial groups living side by side within the borders of an imagined American nation.<sup>91</sup> French-French marriages are happy occasions whereas Swedish-

Bohemian alliances are doomed. Yet a close reading of the literary landscape reveals that to a significant extent it is already a dynamic Euro-American hybrid characterised by transcontinental transfers and intercultural encounters. In this regard, it can be argued that the landscape contains clues that pluralism and diversity in the sense of autonomous ethno-racial communities is not likely to be sustainable. The Euro-centric landscape is already becoming hybridised due to transfers and interactions across ethno-racial, national, economic, and political borders. Notably, the 'map-like prospect' serves as an emblem of a purportedly modern, rational, and democratic American landscape that is without European precedent even as it borrows key concepts from the old world. It is, moreover, because of the nature and ramifications of these transfers and encounters that it is inadequate to describe Cather's literary Plains as a 'cross-fertilisation among the nations of the West'. This may be the case in a restricted Euro-American sense, but, as we have seen, the novel frequently alludes intentionally as well as inadvertently to the conflicts, violence, and losses that they also involved. It is ultimately for this reason that we risk overlooking tensions, conflicts, and struggles between the different groups inhabiting the Plains as well as their multiple and at times conflicting affiliations and allegiances if we include Cather in a contemporary multicultural canon without first paying careful attention to her representation of the region's spatial history.

I want finally to take a look at Alexandra's pose of sincere, innocent yearning for the unsettled land, her anthropomorphised lover, and how it relates to the transformation of wilderness into landscape that takes place in Parts I and II. From the point of view of the scene at the end of 'The Wild Land' when 'the Genius of the Divide' bends to the protagonist's will, it can be argued that Alexandra's yearning is straightforwardly imperial rather than nostalgic. However, nostalgia is not far behind.

The feeling of a sense of loss and longing associated with the disappearance of wilderness is expressed soon afterwards when Alexandra and Carl are looking out over the idealised landscape garden and the latter remarks:

[t]his is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, 'Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?' (118).

This sentiment shared by Carl and Alexandra marks an interesting and telling shift in the novel's fictionalised history of place. No sooner has wilderness, the savage other that only a few years earlier drove people of the land, been domesticated and civilised before the first sign of a nostalgic longing for it appears. This change in perception and mood is telling not so much in the context of *O Pioneers!* but more as a precursor of how the treatment of space and place in some of Cather's later southwestern novels is influenced by a modernist international aesthetics of exile. In accordance with Rosaldo's thesis, this aesthetics appropriates vanished or vanishing pre-modern, primitive landscapes in an attempt at grounding exiled, counter-cultural literary geographies in places that are authentic, uncorrupted, and noble.

To understand the workings of imperialist nostalgia in Cather's fiction more generally, then, it is worthwhile to explore briefly how the representation of the pre-settlement landscape and the portrayal of Indians in *O Pioneers!* differ from those of her novels set in the Southwest. The near absence, marginalization, and the persistent negative troping of the former seem at odds with the importance and value attached to indigenous landscapes in Cather's later novels such as *Death Comes for the*

*Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*. In the context of Cather's fictionalised accounts of the emergence of a Euro-American landscape on North America's central grasslands, the troping of the 'unsettled' Plains as wilderness effectively corroborates the notion that the earliest pioneer landscape is a valued and reified locus in the author's artistic and cultural vision of America. For the same reason, it might be argued that Cather's literary geographies of the Midwest adhere more closely to culturally dominant Euro-American practices of history writing and representations of place at the time. Just as *O Pioneers!* does, so her article 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle' also presents the spatial history of the Plains as a progressive recovery narrative in a rhetoric that displays traces of both stadialism and social Darwinism. By contrast, the indigenous southwestern landscape takes on a more explicit counter-cultural function and manifests a more conventional form of imperialist nostalgia in a novel like *The Professor's House* (1925). As a disappearing place, it – like the pioneer Plains place – becomes a valued topos for articulating a critique of the standardization, homogenisation, and 'ugly crest of materialism' that Cather saw as characteristic of American society in the 1920s.<sup>92</sup>

The different ideological function of these native landscapes can be illustrated through a brief comparison of Tom Outland's experience of being 'full to the brim' when he is alone on the mesa with the landscape-as-wilderness found in Part I of *O Pioneers!* (PH, 251). Whereas the former represents a less-is-more modernist primitivism, the latter signifies an alienating if potentially placeful void. Away from civilisation, Tom does not 'feel the need for a record' nor 'to go back and unravel things step by step' (PH, 252). Instead, he feels 'filial piety' for the mesa through a process that mirrors an act of artistic or literary place-making: 'Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that

process, going on in my mind, brought with it happiness. It was possession' (PH, 250-1). Here we learn that Tom's experience constitutes a counter-cultural appropriation of a Pueblo landscape by a Euro-American artist who is influenced by a modernist aesthetics of exile – spatial as well as temporal – while exploring the possibility of communicating and communing with ancient aboriginal places.

By contrast, the desolate emptiness of the Plains wilderness is more directly concerned with nation and empire building and the articulation of a regional identity. As Guy Reynolds has recently documented, Cather was intent on lifting the Plains landscape of her childhood onto the nation's literary map: '[a] 1905 letter to Kate Cleary stated Cather's desire to render an America that had not yet been portrayed in fiction – the small-town, Midwestern world of Nebraska.'<sup>93</sup> On the one hand, then, her literary landscaping was meant to elevate the importance of something – the Great Plains as a literary topos – that was considered culturally marginal, irrelevant, or even harmful from the perspective of the literary establishment of the 1910s.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, she also used it as an opportunity to propose a symbolic solution to the crisis of direction and purpose facing a post-frontier America. In the wider context of Cather's oeuvre, we can see that by 1913 she had not yet arrived at a cultural critique of contemporary America such as the one found a decade or so later in *The Professor's House* and the essay 'Nebraska: the end of the first cycle'. From her position as an east-coast writer in the early 1910s, she was still labouring to lift the pioneer Plains landscape to literary expression and onto the nation's literary and cultural map. She may not have had much success with either in the short term, but in the long term, Cather's pioneer Plains were to exert a major influence on how the region has been perceived, represented, understood, and, by implication, overlooked, misunderstood, and misrepresented in the popular as well as academic imagination.

### 3. A Palimpsest of Prairie: Robert Kroetsch's early field-note poems

#### *Siting Robert Kroetsch's Field-note Poetry*

The derivative and unending lineage of Robert Kroetsch's long poems is instructive when one first approaches the representation and negotiation of space and place that takes in place in them. The first poem in what turned out to be a series of long poems appeared in 1973 in the form of 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'The Ledger'; two poems that tell the story of Euro-Canadian settlement in the West and enquire into how this story is told. A third poem was published in 1977 in the shape of 'Seed Catalogue', a long poem that is both about a particular place, the prairies, and itself as a poem of place. A further two poems appeared before the publication of the first collection of long poems, *Field Notes*, in 1981. This volume included a total of eight long poems with 'Stone Hammer Poem' serving as a prologue. In 1989 a volume called *Completed Field Notes* was compiled containing not only *Field Notes* but a further two collections of long poems from the 1980s, *Advice to My Friends* (1985) and *Country & Western*, which had not previously been published as a separate book of poetry. Even though the title *Completed Field Notes* suggests the end or completion of a project, the subsequent publication of *The Hornbook of Rita K* (2001) and *The Snowbird Poems* (2004) challenges any notions of completion or closure that readers may have held. Indeed, as Kroetsch explains in the 'Author's Note' to *Completed Field Notes*, 'the sequence of poems announced in medias res, is, in its acceptance of its own impossibilities, completed.'<sup>1</sup>

This paradoxical sense of completion as incompleteness offers a telling clue to the modernist and post-modernist aesthetics and thinking manifest in Kroetsch's field-note poetry, including its exploration of the prairies as space and place. As the author himself points out, his field poems inscribe themselves into 'the project (I leave it



nameless) announced by Wordsworth and Whitman and rendered impossible by the history and thought and art of the twentieth century.’<sup>2</sup> In an American context, an important part of the ‘nameless’ project has been the naming and making of place in the works of, firstly, writers such as Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman and, later, modernist poets such as William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, for example, *Paterson, New Jersey* and *The Maximus Poems*. In essays and interviews on writing, Kroetsch has repeatedly cited Williams’ poetics of place as a source of inspiration: ‘A local pride is where you’ve got to being, and we didn’t have a local pride. Because all the models were telling us we didn’t even exist. And that’s what I take from Williams – the lesson of a beginning of a local pride.’<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Kroetsch’s early long poems in particular offer lessons in the beginning of a local pride by exploring intensely and extensively the possibility of lifting a local place, the Canadian Plains, to literary expression.

On the topic of American place naming, obvious parallels – as well as differences – exist between Charles Olson’s notion of ‘composition by field’ and Kroetsch’s own ‘fields of interrogation’.<sup>4</sup> In Olson’s ambitious poetic forays into what he considers the central fact of American life, space, and encompassing local, continental, and meta-physical levels, composition by field takes on multiple meanings as Catharine R. Simpson explains:

The field is the page upon which the poet, at his typewriter, scores his poem; the soil of a place, the sand, dirt, and “fisherman’s field” of Gloucester, which the poet explores; the physical state of the space of which the poet is a part; and the metaphorical ground where the Tree of Life may grow.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Kroetsch's field-note poetry may be said to share the first three assumptions, the metaphorical 'Tree of Life' is notably absent or 'elsewhere' in his poems of place. There are as we are told in 'Seed Catalogue', '[n]o trees/around the house' (CFN, 80 & 31).

If the presence of 'The Tree of Life' signals Olson's modernist leanings, then the absence of trees – understood figuratively as the absence of a mythical or meta-physical first place – in Kroetsch's *Field Notes* alludes to their post-structural orientation. Stemming partly from Kroetsch's role as editor with Bill Spanos of *boundary II: a journal of post-modern literature* in the early 1970s, the influence of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida is manifest throughout his long poems. Of particular importance are the former's notion of 'un-concealing' and the latter's idea of deconstruction. In an essay entitled 'Unhiding the Hidden' Kroetsch writes of the practices of a number of Canadian writers who came to the fore during the 1970s:

It is possible that the old obsessive notion of identity and ego, is it itself a spent fiction, that these new writers are discovering something essentially new, something essential not only to Canadians but to the world they would uncreate. Whatever the case, they dare the ultimate *contra-diction*: they uncreate themselves into existence. Like Heidegger they will accept that the root meaning of the word truth is un-concealing, dis-closing, dis-covering, un-hiding.<sup>6</sup>

This Heideggarian mode of enquiry does not find anything new in the traditional imperial-colonial sense of discovering a 'new world'. Instead it lifts the cover off the hidden meanings of always already existing words and worlds.<sup>7</sup> Central to this process

of 'un-concealing' is a deconstruction of common binaries that have helped forge a coercive identity for the Great Plains as garden and grid as opposed to wilderness and chaos.

As we shall see, Kroetsch's mode of deconstruction involves a dialogics of erasure and (re-)inscription and a concept of knowledge and meaning that is both positively and negatively defined. As a result, place is conceived and represented not as one and united, but as a space of difference and differentiation that in some ways resembles Derrida's concepts of *différance* and undecidability.<sup>8</sup> To briefly illustrate how Kroetsch's notion of deconstruction operates, we may point to the way in which straight, binary columns of debit and credit structure 'The Ledger' only to be broken and undermined again and again by the multiple definitions of the word itself. In turn, the uncovered slippages between signifier and its signifieds render the poem's attempt at presenting a closed and balanced account of westward homesteading increasingly ambiguous and polysemous: '(it doesn't balance)', we are told repeatedly (CFN, 11). In the context of the present study, these deconstructive strategies are of particular interest because they are instrumental to the critical dismantling of certain dominant modes of representing the prairies as space and place. They enable the poetic voice to ask the sorts of questions about narrative templates and semantic presuppositions that Kroetsch discusses in the essay 'The Veil of Knowing': 'How do we read at all, as readers, when the meta-narrative that guides most reading (and writing) is called into doubt?'<sup>9</sup>

Based on these initial observations, it is possible to situate Kroetsch's early long poems in the context of a modern and post-modern literary discourse on the Canadian and American West that was under formation during the 1970s. Other prominent contributions to this enquiry into space and place include Michael

Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston* (1974), Fred Wah's *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (1975), Eli Mandel's *Out of Place* (1977) and Ed Dorn's *Idaho Out* (1965) and *Slinger* (1975). One thing that these long poems have in common is an intention to challenge culturally dominant and often imperial-colonial conventions of representing space, place, time, and identity. As I have already suggested, they do so through various formal operations, for example, syntactical derangement, cut-up, collage, erasure, and emptying that result in discontinuous and dispersed narratives. Because of the way they break up spatially and temporally contiguous and continuous narratives, they may be said, on the one hand, to be destructive. But, on the other, they are also constructive in so far as they are in search of a grammar of fragments. So even though the close attention they pay to form and signification reflects a modernist and post-structuralist formalist preoccupation, the texts nonetheless remain political because of the violence that their formal experiments exert on meta-narratives and tropes that have shaped the way readers see, understand, and inhabit the so-called new world. Approached from this perspective, we can begin to understand how Kroetsch's field-note poetry negotiates in his own words a state of 'at once resisting and [being] caught inside a story of empire.'<sup>10</sup>

As this general 'siting' of Kroetsch's field-note poetry suggests, the texts both draw on and contribute to a modernist and post-structuralist long-poem tradition that explores America north and south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel from the point of view of space and place. In addition to being informed by the deconstructive strategies of Heidegger and Derrida – their breaking down of 'the meta-narrative that guides most reading' and their search for a way to read and write in its absence – Kroetsch also practices a type of literary archaeology that owes much to the thinking of another post-

structuralist, the historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. As the titles of Kroetsch's early field notes indicate, the texts point to themselves as artefacts – archaeological shards – that the writer-as-archaeologist sights and cites as he traverses the Plains in an attempt to site the spaces of the place.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, it is primarily from this archaeological perspective that I undertake a close reading of the two long poems that most directly address the question of prairie place-making, 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'Seed Catalogue'.

To prepare the ground for such a reading, the first part of this chapter sets out in more detail what is meant by the term literary archaeology in relation to Kroetsch's long poems. This brief theoretical prelude is then followed by a close reading of 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'Seed Catalogue'. It explicates the genealogical process through which the poems uncover local particulars in order to deconstruct culturally dominant narratives of place as well as count the cost of the imperial-colonial transfers upon which they are premised. Presented as material artefacts, the poems interrogate and displace linear, unified, and closed meta-narratives such as the myth of the prairie landscape as a creation out of nothing. What emerges instead is a history of place characterised by, on the one hand, absences, loss, and erasure and, on the other, presence, finding, and inscription.

Having to map/write from within this dialogic and unstable in-between, the poetic voice realises that no straightforward emplacement is possible following displacement. Just as a pull towards a unified, enclosed, and affective sense of place continues to make itself felt in 'the other garden' – an inhabited, vernacular prairie place – and the spectre of an imperial edenic garden, so the poet archaeologist must also come to terms with the not knowing that his genealogy of place reveals. By tracing the placial palimpsest that these lines of inquiry delineate, I show how

Kroetsch's textual artefacts link local and regional particulars to historical transnational and -continental movements that operate at once below and beyond the levels of region and nation. In stark contrast to stories of a unified and enclosed prairie homeplace, Kroetsch's transgressive, unfixed, and incomplete literary geography allows only low and paradoxical levels of local, regional, and national identity formation. It does so, I argue, as part of a Canadian rather than American place-making strategy that is post-regional/-national and vernacular as opposed to national and imperial-colonial.

*Literary Archaeology: opening up narratives of place*

As I have already mentioned, the archaeological method that informs Kroetsch's interrogation of the Plains place in his early field notes owes a significant debt to Michel Foucault, in particular his notions of an archaeology of knowledge and genealogy. In Foucault's work, archaeology of knowledge refers to an enquiry into the historical conditions that made the formation of powerful discourses, for example those of psychiatry and medicine, possible.<sup>12</sup> Key to this enquiry into the archive of human knowledge is the genealogical method since it unearths places and events at which one might 'detect the incidence of interruptions'.<sup>13</sup> These incidents tellingly contain subjugated, marginalized, and silenced knowledges and are to be found 'in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history'.<sup>14</sup> This line of enquiry leads Foucault to explore places on the margins of society, for example asylums, prisons and brothels in order to excavate the concealed knowledges that reside in places and events that have no place in proper or official history writing.

In doing so, the archaeological method challenges established conventions of progressive history writing in works such as *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *The*

*Birth of the Clinic* (1963). The interruptions that Foucault identifies render continuous histories discontinuous and 'show that the history of a concept is not wholly and entirely that of its progressive refinement...'<sup>15</sup> In addition, the interruptive incidents also shed light on the operations of and demarcate the limits of standard knowledge forms and historiographical practices. They show how 'a certain, now traditional form of historical analysis' seeks to trace back to origins from historical documents in order to reconstitute the past as a series of causally linked events organised along a chronological timeline.<sup>16</sup> In place of such structurally linear and totalising discourses, which historically have made powerful claims to truth, the archaeological method presents a general history. In relation to Kroetsch's field-note poetry, this alternate history is particularly illuminating for two reasons. It takes the form of a 'space of dispersion' that decentres the field of knowledge by 'mak[ing] differences' and it identifies gaps in human knowledge and slippages in the language in which it is invariably represented.

In the context of *Field Notes*, we may usefully understand these gaps as a void or a negative space that demarcates the limits of material, positivist history. But they can also usefully be understood from a structuralist point of view that is closer to Derrida. In the latter sense, the void marks an always already absence in presence. It becomes a sign of an alterity that makes difference and linguistic meaning undecidable and slippery in a manner that resembles but is not identical to Derrida's notion of generalised writing. In either case, however, the gaps are a means to resisting the epistemic and semantic closure of traditional binaries, for example, garden and wilderness and centre and periphery. Both kinds of void do so by signalling not knowing as opposed to knowing and spectral presence as opposed to immediate and full presence. In addition, there is also a distinct sense in which gaps

and void signify erasure, absence, nowhere, silence, and death. In the poems, these tropes contribute to a writing out of existence of conventional tropes and narratives of space and place as well as gesture towards all that has not yet been said, including, possibly, the unsayable. Finally, it should also be noted that in the latter sense of a negative capability, the placeless void also appears to trigger a desire in the poetic voice to fill it.<sup>17</sup>

In Kroetsch's literary adaptation of an archaeology of knowledge, the enquiry into the Plains place also begins with a genealogical writing back. Among the salient fragments that the 'gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary' practice of genealogy uncovers are a stone, a hammer, a ledger, and a seed catalogue.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the place in which they are found, i.e. the prairie, is repeatedly depicted as an unpromising place of loss and absence veering towards cultural and geographical placelessness. In 'Seed Catalogue', for example, the answer to the historical question '*How do you grow a past/* to live in' becomes a list of absences of a Western cultural canon occasionally and ironically truncated by the absence of local people, places, and events (CFN, 35). The suggestion is not only of a place without 'proper' history or culture, but also that the vernacular Plains place has been written out of existence by the transfer of old-world figures and narratives. We can thus begin to see how the uncovering of the particulars of a culturally marginal place is key not only to interrupting a dominant historical discourse but also to mapping a different story of the Plains. Hence Kroetsch explains on his archaeological approach to place in the earliest field notes:

It is a kind of archaeology that makes this place, with all its implications, available to us for literary purposes. We have not yet grasped the whole



story; we have hints and guesses that slowly persuade us towards the recognition of larger patterns. Archaeology allows the fragmentary nature of the story, against the coerced unity of traditional history. Archaeology allows for discontinuity. It allows for layering. It allows for imaginative speculation.<sup>19</sup>

In this extract Kroetsch outlines a literary archaeology that is both place erasing and place making. The genealogical unearthing of the particulars of the prairie place identifies incidents and events that interrupt ‘the coerced unity of traditional history’ including, as we shall see, prominent tropes and meta-narrative structures that (mis-)represent the place and shape lives. Here we might usefully recall the imperial transfers in *O Pioneers!* of European landscape motifs and the influence of Virgil and Michelet’s historiographies. Of his relation to such modes of history writing and story-telling Kroetsch has remarked in a critical essay that ‘I was caught in a story that I did not even recognize as story, because I did not know how stories retell themselves.’<sup>20</sup> What he shares with Foucault then is a conviction that these stories make up a powerful ‘capillary’ discourse that ‘reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.’<sup>21</sup>

Kroetsch’s brand of literary archaeology, however, not only seeks to resist these dominant discourses by breaking them down, it also ‘makes this place’. The unconcealing of placial particulars renders totalising histories fragmented and discontinuous and makes space for the imagining of a grammar of fragments within the fields of the poem. The literary archaeologist begins, in other words, to trope and structure his shards and field notes within a textual space, the long poems, in order to

seek out a different and differentiating spatial history. This story may also be described in Foucauldian terms as ‘a space of dispersion’ that ‘makes differences’ and is irreducible to a single field, that is, a fixed, closed, or essentialist sense of place. It is, I believe, when viewed from this archaeological perspective that the artefacts in the title of the earliest long poems prove particularly illuminating to an explication of the literary representation of the Plains place in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’.

*‘Stone Hammer Poem’: a genealogical writing back*

As the title suggests, the stone in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ is not simply a stone but also a hammer and a poem. As an archaeological fragment, it is a natural material (‘a stone old as the last Ice Age’), a man-made artefact (‘Cut to a function’), and a literary trope, (‘[t]he poem/ is the stone’) (CFN, 5, 3, 6). By tracing how the stone is transformed from natural material to artefact to poetic trope, we can see how the eleven short parts – or archaeological fields – of the poem attempt to ground and construct a coherent narrative of the prairie place. In trying to trace a spatio-temporally linear lineage in this way, the poem appears to undertake what Foucault describes as a ‘traditional form of historical analysis’.<sup>22</sup> However, the field notes of the poetic voice’s genealogical writing back do not just uncover causality, coherence, and presence but also indeterminacy, rupture, and absence in the natural and cultural production of a regional landscape.

The first line of the poem not only asserts the physical and historical particularity of the stone but also its transformation from natural material to man-made artefact: ‘this stone/ become a hammer/ of stone’ (3). In a similar way, the repetition of the demonstrative article ‘this’ at the beginning of both part one and two points to the presence of the stone as natural material, man-made weapon (‘maul’) and

‘paperweight on my [the poet’s] desk’. It provides, in other words, a material and grounded point of departure for the tracing of a spatial history of the Plains, a history told from the present of the early 1970s North America where we find the poet sat at his desk (CFN, 3). Of central significance to the type of material history that the literary archaeologist traces in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ is the shaping of the natural world by man as part of a process of spatialisation. The centrality of shaping to place-making is reflected in the recurrent troping of ‘the hand’ that ‘chipped’, ‘hammered’, ploughed, and wrote/writes the stone (CFN, 3, 5, 6, 8). However, the initial transformation from nature to artefact that would form an identifiable – potentially a mythic – point of origin in a progressive history of space and place is immediately undermined by indeterminacy and contradiction: ‘this maul/ is the colour/ of bone (no,/ bone is the colour/ of this stone maul) (CFN, 3).

In the third of the four brief stanzas that comprise part one, the reader encounters for the first time the absences and gaps that interrupt the writing of a coherent and continuous landscape history: ‘The raw hide loops/ are gone, the hand is gone, the/ buffalo’s skull/ is gone;’. The absence of loops, hand, and buffalo signals to the reader that the stone is in effect a mere trace of the historical events and socio-cultural context that produced the maul, and which the poet is trying to reconstruct from the present. The hand that shaped with a purpose is gone and as a result the second part ends, or more accurately remains open-ended, when the poet pauses and abandons his search in mid-sentence: ‘Cut to a function,/ this stone was/ (the hand is gone-’ (CFN, 3). The gap between the finite and infinite verb and the incomplete parenthesis suggest that the poet as local archaeologist and historian is at a loss when faced with the absence and indeterminacy of the place’s lineage. It would seem, therefore, that he temporarily abandons his attempt at piecing together a

coherent history of place that he began only a few lines earlier, ‘where I begin/ this poem...’ (CFN, 3). The afterthought that the hyphen normally indicates remains absent, thus signalling, on the one hand, a lack of knowledge and narrative discontinuity. On the other, it also signals, as we shall see, the openness of the literary archaeologist’s field from which the poet is trying to construct a spatial history based on the artefacts and events that he comes across.

Even at this early stage, it is noteworthy how the fragments and discontinuity of the writer’s field notes provide the reader with an insight into the constructedness and artifice involved in the production of space. Instead of covering up and glossing over the history of a local place through the imposition of seemingly transparent tropes, the artefacts and incomplete syntax of the poem’s fields drag the operations of the productive and creative processes to the fore. Because they do so, we can see how ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ differentiates itself right from the outset from the kind of literary and visual landscape motifs that we saw in *O Pioneers!* and which also feature prominently in countless other novels, paintings, and films depicting the westward course of Canadian and American empire, for example, Ralph Connor’s *The Sky Pilot*, Arthur Stringer’s *The Prairie Wife*, Frances Palmer’s *Across the Continent* ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’, and John Gast’s *American Progress*. Looked at from this perspective, the field notes are not only notes towards a history of the Canadian plains, but also notes on the representation of spatial history.

### *Losing, Finding, Losing...*

It is not only the poet, however, who is lost at the end of the second part or field. In the broken lines of the first of its two stanzas, the reader is told that the stone in its present incarnation as paperweight on the poet’s desk ‘was/ found in a wheatfield/ lost...’ (3). With typical Kroetschian flair for contradiction and ambiguity, the stone is

found lost. A literal and commonsensical reading of this line would be that the stone was lost before someone found or 'discovered' it in an imperial sense. By contrast, from the historical and narrative perspective that is emerging in the poem, it remains lost. It remains unplaced and without a well-defined context in the fragmented story that the poetic voice unconceals as he enquires into the history of a local Plains place. Hence in part three, he speculates about how the stone may have been lost and shaped in a series of broken and unpunctuated lines held together by the co-ordinating conjunction 'or'.

The line about being found lost also marks the first example of the finding and losing that comes to epitomise the history of the prairie as space and place in this and later poems. The stone as stone, hammer and poem continues to be lost and found and thus erases and (re-)shapes the place and its history. In the first stanza of part five, for example, the reader hears of a history of loss but also of loss as re-creation, 'the retreating/ the recreating ice' and 'the retreating buffalo and Indians' (CFN, 5). Loss in this sense is place erasing in so far as it removes, covers up, and hides. But it is also place making in so far as it uncovers and changes the lie of the land. At a personal level the poet's grandfather also contributes to this history of losing and finding. He loses 'the stone maul' only for his son, the poet's father, to recover it and make a memorial out of it (CFN, 7). In turn, these family events are turned into narrative by the poet tracing the story of the stone from his desk in part eleven. Yet, in his own literary way, the poet has also managed to 'lose' the field in which the stone was found since he 'gave it/ (for a price)/ to a young man' (CFN, 6).

By tracing the losing and finding of the stone throughout the poem, it becomes clear that the spatial history of the prairie is characterised by a dialogic process of erasure and inscription. Its movements and the forces behind them are found in the

realms of the natural, cultural, and literary and are not only ongoing but also link the present Plains place to a deep past as indicated by the references to ‘the last Ice Age’ and the stone as possibly ‘a million/ years older than/ the hand that/ chipped stone...’ (CNF, 4 & 5). Tellingly, the palimpsest layering suggests that the shaping of the prairie place does not happen along the linear lines of a continuous, teleological history. Like the pages of the ledger that remain ‘(by accident)’ in the poem of that name, there is a significant element of unknowing and contingency in the genealogy of the stone and by figurative extension the history of the Plains (CFN, 12).

This element of unknowing and contingency also manifests itself in the layout and syntax of the poem. At first glance the lines of the poem appear to run in a straight linear column along the left-hand margin of the page. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that this linear flow is not continuous. It is frequently interrupted, broken, and left incomplete both visually and syntactically as if pre-figuring the more radical transgressions of linear lines and binaries in ‘The Ledger’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’. What we can say at this point, then, is that the spatial design or layout of the literary topos of ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ reflects the poet archaeologist’s unearthing of local fragments in stark contrast to the grand designs of, for example, grid and landscape prospect. In the wider context of this thesis, it is interesting to note, moreover, that a similar conception of a deep Plains history of ‘transit and translation’ and ‘transgressing, regressing, transgressing’ emerges during William Least Heat-Moon’s archaeological deep mapping of Chase County, Kansas in *PrairyErth* (PE, 103 & 158).

### *Record, Event, and Imaginative Speculation*

Despite the absence of the historical events that the stone refers to, the poet does not abandon his exploration of and meditation on stone, hammer, and poem. Instead he

begins again as if encouraged by the openness at the end of part two and the simile at the end of part one which compares the shape of the stone to 'the skull of a child'(CFN, 3). Part three exemplifies how the indeterminacy of fragments and absences may lead to 'imaginative speculation' and spatial history as a series of field enquiries that yield a story of stories arranged metonymically side-by-side through the use of the co-ordinating conjunction 'or'. In the absence of particular historical events and agents, the poetic voice imagines possible scenarios in which the stone 'fell from the travois or/ a boy playing lost it in/ the prairie wool or/ a woman left it in/ the brain of a buffalo or' (CFN, 4). Thus, rather than simply leaving the poet without history, literary archaeology's interruption and fragmentation of a continuous and linear narrative of place opens up the possibility of a potential proliferation of stories. If one adopts this point of view, the gaps that the genealogical writing back uncovers can then be seen to violate certain conventional modes of history writing and, in doing so, to create a void that is both place erasing and potentially placeful.

The type of 'imaginative speculation' that takes place in 'Stone Hammer Poem' can be explicated further if we take a look at how the coordinating as opposed to subordinating 'or-or-syntax' of part three is repeated in the penultimate stanza of the poem. As an object of poetic meditation, the writer imagines the stone on his desk 'smelling a little of cut/ grass or maybe even of/ ripening wheat or of/ buffalo blood hot/ in the dying sun' (CFN, 8). What is important to the imaginative speculation of the poet is not that the stone does smell of grass, wheat or blood, but that one can imagine that it does. By unhiding gaps in historical knowledge, the genealogical writing back effectively clears space in which the imagination is now free to go from one thing to another. As it does so, it lifts the particulars of the prairie place into language and construes relations between them. It should be noted, for example, that

the open-ended, metonymic structure of 'Stone Hammer Poem' is also apparent at part and poem level in 'The Ledger', 'Seed Catalogue', and throughout *Field Notes* where serial numbering and alphabetical listing defy causally-linked and hierarchically-organised accounts of history. Instead of being structured along linear lines and curves that chart the progressive transformation of space into place, the metonymic prairie place of imaginative speculation eventually becomes labyrinthine thanks to the dialogics of its palimpsest mode of enquiry.

Practiced in this way, imaginative speculation is key to the acquisition of a Williamsque 'local pride [that] enables us to creat [*sic*] our own culture – 'by lifting an environment to expression'<sup>23</sup>. As Kroetsch himself has noted with reference to William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, '[t]hat pattern of contraries, all the possibilities implied in *record* and *event*, for me finds its focus in the model suggested by the phrase: a local pride.'<sup>24</sup> As we have already seen, the exploration of these possibilities brings with it a breaking down of received historical knowledge and the dominant narratives and tropes that it informs and is sustained by. In part three, gaps in historical knowledge are represented, for example, as gaps in textual space that separate agent and action, subject and predicate, the person and the lost artefact. As my reading of 'Seed Catalogue' will make clear, this marks the beginning of a process of interrogation and displacement of national and imperial-colonial narratives of how the Canadian Plains were settled by European cultures. But from a writerly and readerly point of view, the gaps may also be said to open up textual space in order to try to lift a hitherto invisible prairie experience to literary expression. According to Kroetsch, his early long poems attempt to give poetic expression to an inhabited and vernacular prairie place in order both 'to understand ourselves' and make other



experiences possible: 'A local pride does not exclude the rest of the world, or other experiences; rather it makes them possible.'<sup>25</sup>

However, the articulation of a local pride is not a straightforward case of lifting an environment to expression through imaginative speculation. The local particulars that the voice in the poem lifts to literary expression are surrounded by a void. In the final stanza of part three, which looks at the stone from a geological perspective, the reader is told that it is a million years older than the hand that turned it into an artefact. This opens up an almost infinite number of possible but also unknowable stories. It is appropriate therefore that the third field 'ends' with an unpunctuated 'or' as if to remind the reader that history cannot be contained or fixed within a grammar of finite declarative sentences, nor the templates provided by common historiographical meta-narratives of progress as a series of linear ascensions and declensions. In this way, the genealogical writing back makes it clear that it cannot trace the stone beyond the absent hand leaving it unable to account fully for the history of the object and the development of its meaning in relation to the Plains.

*Facing the Void: 'to know (not know)'*

The recurrent indeterminacy and contingency of the literary archaeologist's search for a placial lineage culminates in a stanza of historiographical meta-questions in part six. The poetic voice places question marks in front of questions central to his writing back in search of the past. He asks of his settler grandfather who found the stone in his field, '? did he curse/ ? did he try to/ go back' and on a more general note, '? what happened/ I have to/ I want/ to know (not know)/ ? WHAT HAPPENED' (CFN, 5). The fronted question marks obviously draw attention to the recurrent problem of knowing that faces the literary archaeologist as he attempts to reconstruct a local history of place. But by fronting the question mark in the quintessential history

question, ‘?what happened’, the poet also signals a need to interrogate the mode of historical inquiry and knowledge that such a question yields. Like Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the fronted question marks question the kind of knowledge that answering such questions produce, for example, the construction of linear and progressive historical narratives that posit a point of origin and a subsequent sequence of causally linked events. It raises, in other words, not only epistemological but also ideological questions: how, by whom and for what purposes is our knowledge of space and place produced?

As for the lines ‘I have to/ I want/ to know (not know)/ ?WHAT HAPPENED’, their contradictory signification may be said to reflect history’s obscurity. In a straightforward manner they declare that the ‘I’ of the poem finds it necessary and desires to know what happened. Bearing such compelling motivation in mind, the exasperation of the last line, ‘? WHAT HAPPENED’ can meaningfully be read as a result of the frustrations that arise as the need and desire for historical narrative is denied by the absences, indeterminacies, and unknowing that characterise the prairies as a topos of natural and cultural place-making. Understood in this way, the parenthetical ‘(not know)’, which immediately contradicts the need to know, can then be read as an emotional reaction to the pressing problem of knowing. Taken to its logical conclusion, however, this interpretation of ‘not knowing’ would lead to an abandoning and silencing of history; a problem which, as we shall see, also faces the would-be poet of place in ‘Seed Catalogue’.

If we continue this line of enquiry, the contradiction between knowing and not knowing then serves mainly to render the last lines of part six ambiguous and underscore the exasperating tension felt by the poet in his search for a coherent lineage and sense of place. At this point in the poem, the reader can no longer be sure

if the voice wants to know or not, although his stated desire and probing in previous as well as later fields seem to suggest that the desire to resolve the ambiguity and fill the void of not knowing remains. On the one hand, wanting to but not being able to know has created a field of tension in which the literary archaeologist has to operate. Through the disjointed syntax of part six, the reader senses that whether the poet finds or does not find the maul he, like 'The Blackfoot (the/Cree?)' before him, is 'cursed' (CFN, 5). Read in this way, the exasperation of the last line shows literary archaeology to be a practice that will at times lead to a frustrating sense of placelessness in contrast to the place-making potential of imaginative speculation. It would seem to be for this reason that there is no revelatory resolution in sight in 'Stone Hammer Poem' as opposed to a novel like *O Pioneers!* where the protagonist discovers the placefulness of a void – wilderness – in a moment of mythic revelation, which enables her to transform it into a reified locus, that is, a homestead garden.

From an archaeological perspective, however, 'not know' need not be understood in such straightforwardly negative terms. It should also, I believe, be understood in Foucauldian terms as a form of knowing that includes knowing what one does not know. In this regard, the negative 'not know' refers to the gaps in knowledge that help demarcate the limits of a traditional line of positivist historical enquiry. It becomes part, in other words, of the interrogation of conventional modes of history writing that the fronting of question marks suggests, '?what happened' (CFN, 5). As other fields have already revealed, this sense of 'not knowing' not only un-hides gaps in historical knowledge that interrupt spatio-temporally progressive narratives. It also clears space for imaginative speculation in response to the desire to fill the void, 'I want/ to know (not know)' (CFN, 5).

The place-erasing and -making of this type of archaeological deconstruction is central not only to 'Stone Hammer Poem's but also 'Seed Catalogue's exploration of the possibilities of knowing and representing place and space; in other words, to the early field poems' attempt at lifting the Plains environment to literary expression and creating a local pride. For this reason, the apparent contradiction in the phrase 'to know (not know)' can be seen as signalling an acceptance of a negative capability, of having to live in a landscape and with a history that will always be partly unknown. But in doing so, or more to the point, because of doing so, it also becomes possible for the writer to make the story or myth of the place generative again and create 'new geographies'. As we shall see, this is what he sets about doing in the next three parts or fields which all explore the poem as a place-making topos in a discursive and literary sense.<sup>26</sup>

*Literary Place-making: the poem as a spatialising topos*

If the poet's search for a local history of space and place reaches a zenith of unknowing, questioning and exasperation in part six, then part seven marks a turning point, another beginning, and a different approach to spatialisation. Whereas part one to six all begin by positing the presence of the stone as a particular of the place, the opening of part seven transforms stone into poem: 'The poem/ is the stone' (CFN, 6). In the face of the radical indeterminacy and unknowing of the preceding part, focus changes from stone as a trace of a material history to stone as a literary trope of the spatially productive topos that is the poem. The poem-as-stone metaphor points self-referentially to the poem as a textual artefact and productive topos that is 'chipped and hammered/ until it is shaped/ like the stone/ hammer, the maul' (CFN, 6). In making this transformation, the six lines that make up part seven open up another line of

inquiry which allows for the exploration of formal and discursive aspects of space and place in the latter half of 'Stone Hammer Poem'.

In saying so, I do not mean to suggest that, unlike the stone, the poem does not possess historicity and materiality. Referring to it as a 'stone-hammer' and a 'maul' makes clear that imaginative speculation produces a literary artefact, which functions as a weapon in a discursive and cultural battle. I also do not mean to suggest that the search for a sense of place becomes confined to textual space, or that the poem replaces its quest to lift an environment to expression with a linguistic and semantic exploration of the (in)ability of signs to signify and intervene in social space. On the contrary, a historical, inhabited, and phenomenological Plains experience continues to make itself felt at the level of the textual fields. What the move does signal is that since the poem is a textual artefact, then the production of space and place is also a textual and representational undertaking in salient ways. Describing his experience of growing up 'a homesteader's son' on the Canadian prairies, Kroetsch reminds us that it is discourse in its Foucauldian sense that shapes and 'makes this place': 'I was caught in a story that I did not even recognize as story, because I did not know how stories retell themselves.'<sup>27</sup>

In his essays as well as in his poetry, Robert Kroetsch repeatedly entertains the idea of the literary text as a site or topos for the 'discovery' and making of place. In the essay 'The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues', he writes that '[w]e demand, of the risking eye, new geographies. And the search that was once the test of sailor and horse and canoe is now the test of the poet.'<sup>28</sup> In the present poem this search for 'new geographies' within the fields of the text comes into focus in part eight where the actual field in which the stone was found is re-appropriated as a textual field. The poet re-opens the wheat field that his farming father and grandfather

‘thought was his’ via a double negative that challenges their as well as the queen and the Canadian Pacific Railway’s notion of ownership based on the premise that land is a commodity to be bought, developed, and sold ‘(for a price)’:

... the Indian who  
gave it to the Queen  
(for a price) who  
gave it to the CPR  
(for a price) who  
gave it to my father  
(50 bucks an acre  
*Gott im Himmel* I cut  
down all the trees I  
picked up all the stones) who  
gave it to his son  
(who sold it) (CFN, 6)

The reader learns that the young man he sold the field to ‘did not/ notice that the land/ did not belong’ to any of the colonisers and settlers listed in the progressive and linear genealogy (CFN, 6). These lines criticise the settler culture’s concept of private property as well as its placial recovery narrative which tells the story of the gradual development and improvement of the land as it was passed on from Cree and Blackfoot Indians to the crown, railways, and settlers. By stating that the land did not belong to any of these institutions or groups of people, the poem raises the question: who does the land belong to? According to the poem, the answer in the first instance

is the poet who reclaims the field by saying, 'Now the field is/ mine because/ I gave it...to a young man' (CFN, 6). This comment marks a variation on the theme of losing and finding. In a paradoxical twist finding requires losing: 'ownership' of the field demands that the owner gives it away rather than keeping it (CFN, 6).

In his reading of 'Stone Hammer Poem', George Bowering offers an ethno-poetic interpretation of the concept of 'ownership-as-giving' that informs this part of the poem. He comments that '[v]arious contemplative religions, including western Indians, hold that true ownership of something, from stone to soul, transpires only when one gives it away. Poetry is potlatch.'<sup>29</sup> To this reader, the ethnic element of Bowering's argument seems to lack support elsewhere in the poem. By contrast, the literary element of Bowering's argument, which states that it is only by giving the poem to the reader that the poem becomes the poet's, seems more convincing and of immediate relevance. As Bowering points out, 'we said 'Goethe's Faust' only after Goethe disposed of it.'<sup>30</sup> That is to say, to make the field his, the poet has not only to give it shape, 'the poem is the stone', but also pass it on to a reader, who, as it happens, is addressed directly in the next field: 'This won't/ surprise *you*' (CFN, 7, *my italics*).

By giving the poem to the reader, the poet acknowledges a further dialogic and discursive dimension of spatial production. Literary place-making is played out not only among the fragments of individual poems or in the intertextual spaces between different long poems and the multitude of texts that they gesture towards. Place making also requires an exchange between text and reader and the circulation of the text in society at large. It is necessary therefore to give the poem of the stone – the fragmented, discontinuous, and layered history of place and space – to the reader for at least two reasons. Firstly, it must be done to enable him to begin to read and write

his own history of the Plains place. It is giving in this sense which makes the reader a writer and the text 'writable'.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, it also allows him to begin to see and understand the prairie place in a different light and question dominant versions of its history and how they are told. It is for this reason that the voice of 'Stone Hammer Poem' questions Western notions of ownership and breaks the imperial-colonial lineage as well as its accompanying story of continuous linear progress. He does so not only by selling the land but also through the parenthetical insertion and repetition of the line '(for a price)', which – along with lines such as 'I cut down all the trees' – alludes to the cost of Euro-Canadian settlement and empire (CFN, 6).

From a discursive perspective, then, the poem can be said to be a 'stone-hammer' that challenges culturally dominant representations of the Plains place. As we have just seen, it does so by the now familiar strategy of interrupting national and imperial-colonial narratives of place and questioning ideologically influential concepts of continuity, progress, and ownership. In turn, the fragmented and open narrative that emerges is passed on to the reader with the intention of altering his perception and understanding of the Plains place. In doing so, we may say that the text is trying to produce readers by influencing the way they read the poem and its story of a local place. By probing into textual and discursive aspects of space and place in this way, part seven, eight, and nine exemplify the author's strong interest in, perhaps even obsession with, 'the quest of narrative' which is 'finally, [...] for the form of its quest.'<sup>32</sup> This formalist interest is key to the discursive deconstruction of the region's literary geography in 'Stone Hammer Poem' as well as in subsequent long poems. It contributes to the articulation of a spatial aesthetics – a grammar of fragments – which subverts the forms and discourse of imperial-colonial and nationalist narratives of the Plains region. In their place, the fields of the poem begin to seek out tropes and



narrative structures of a differential and differentiating literary geography. Among other things, this involves the poet reflecting on and negotiating his and his family's relations to an inhabited and vernacular agrarian landscape that until now has remained largely invisible.

### *The Desire for Narrative Returns*

As the words 'I have to/ I want/ to know...' in part six suggested, the desire for a coherent historical narrative of place continues to make itself felt in 'Stone Hammer Poem'. At the same time it exists alongside, this longing may also be said to run counter to the literary archaeologist's unearthing of a discontinuous and palimpsest history. In the context of the fields that make up 'Stone Hammer Poem', the desire for a coherent narrative and an immediate sense of place reappears in the penultimate field. Here we find a personal and vernacular landscape history in the form of a five-stanza narrative poem. In this poem within the poem, we hear of the poet's father who in retirement is 'lonesome' for his family, farm work, and death. George Bowering has noted how this part distinguishes itself from the other parts of 'Stone Hammer Poem' in that 'the poet unashamedly permits himself narration and punctuation,' and thus 'signals substance and decision.' To this observation one might add contiguity, continuity, and coherence. Formally, this change in form and sentiment is marked by complete sentences and declarative utterances: 'He was lonesome for his absent/ son and his daughters [...] his own mother and father' (CFN, 7). As a result, Bowering goes on to say that '[t]he feeling is of addition' in contrast to the erasure and absences of previous fields. Because of the role memory, longing, and nostalgia play in this passage, it articulates a desire for a full and immediate sense of placial presence in the face of absences.<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, the repetition of the predicative ‘lonesome’ signals the father’s wistful longing for the farm life of his past and his immediate family who is now ‘absent’ (CFN, 7). Due to the remembrance undertaken by father and son via the stone as an object of mediation and meditation, part ten becomes a site of present absences. In this field, stone and poem function as memorials – miniature monuments – in a re-telling and re-imagining of a personal landscape history that is veering towards a mythical and mythicising account of the inhabited and vernacular Plains place. The stone as an object of poetic meditation and re-membrance – a putting back in place of the ‘members’ that have been lost – becomes a precursor of the tombstone that is ‘hard to kill’ in the opening long poem of *Field Notes*, ‘The Ledger’ (CFN, 28). By finding, placing and keeping the stone ‘on the railing/ of the back porch in/ a raspberry basket’, the father turns the stone into a personal monument that carries the memory and his nostalgic longing for a fixed sense of place (CFN, 7). That it serves a similar purpose for the poet, even if the outcome is very different, is made clear in the last part of the poem. As an object of meditation, it is the fulcrum of his literary excavation of the prairie place. It is appropriate therefore that he keeps it on his desk, thus mirroring the father’s keeping in the previous part, and ‘[s]ometimes [...] write/ my poems for that/ stone hammer’ (CFN, 8). This performance of acts of memory by both father and son, who writes the landscape poem, is not only suggestive of a longing to belong but also a desire to immortalise the landscape by placing it in a local and personal museum, the ‘raspberry basket’ and the poem respectively (CFN, 7).

Even though part ten does not refer to itself as a poem, it is effectively a poem within the poem. In offering the reader a coherent narrative it represents a different use of textual space both in terms of form - syntax, tropes, narrative – and content –

longing, nostalgia – in comparison to the other fields of ‘Stone Hammer Poem’. Its evocation of longing and nostalgia signals a desire for spatial and temporal closure and for a full and immediate placial presence to displace the void. However, in the overall context of ‘Stone Hammer Poem’, it remains but one of eleven textual fragments. Its position within the poem does not suggest that its account of the prairie home place is any more accurate, representative, or authentic than the other fragments of the place. It remains one metonymic part of the discontinuous and layered spatial history that the poem traces. For this reason, ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ does not resolve its history of the Plains place by finally reproducing the story of the prairie as a spatio-temporally linear and closed narrative. Nor does it insist on the agrarian home place as a redemptive and felicitous locus of longing and nostalgia, which is what we saw happen in the last chapter of *O Pioneers!*.

However, it does not simply erase these stories either. Rather it recognises that they are part of the always already landscape from the point of view of the regional spatial discourse that they have helped shape, and which the voice of ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ speaks against from within. As subsequent long poems demonstrate, the desire for home as fixed and grounded geographically as well as linguistically is both unavoidable and impossible. It points to a fundamental conflict and creative tension in Kroetsch’s poetry on place. Because of the imperial-colonial stories of agrarian settlement that he was brought up with, the longing for a coherent, clearly demarcated, and fixed sense of place becomes a recurring theme. But it also collides with the palimpsest Plains place that his genealogical writing back unhides. The layered and layering process of erasure and inscription, finding and losing, presence and absence that the latter represents is incompatible with the continuity, coherence, and fixity of the former. That is to say, they cannot be resolved but must coexist in a

field of tension. It is from this position within, I believe, that the poet writes (on) place.

*From Stone to Ledger to Seed Catalogue*

At the level of the overall poem we have seen how the poetic voice's genealogical writing back both traces and interrogates the history of a local Plains place. The eleven fields of 'Stone Hammer Poem' present the reader with notes on a fragmented, discontinuous, and layered history that both questions established modes of history writing and begins to re-imagine the prairies. The fulcrum of place-erasing and place-making by fields is the stone as a meta-morphing and multivalent trope. As geological rock, man-made weapon, object of poetic meditation, and physical as well as textual artefact, it offers the reader insights into the production of the Canadian Plains as both a historical and a discursive place. According to Michel Foucault, the stone as a genealogical fragment

must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek then in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes, where they engaged in different roles. Finally, genealogy must define those instances where they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealised.<sup>34</sup>

As my reading has shown, the stone is indeed found in 'unpromising places' unlikely to be included in a national or imperial-colonial history or grand narrative of 'monotonous finality'. Equally, the singular events that mark the appearances and

disappearances of the stone do not allow the poet-archaeologist to piece together a linear and enclosed history that 'trace[s] the gradual curve of [its] evolution'. Instead the eleven fragments of events and aborted narratives serve as record and trace of a spatial history in which the stone was 'engaged in different roles'. As geological stone, maul, memorial and object of meditation, it becomes the key trope of a palimpsest history of losing and finding, presence and absence. It both erases place and makes space for literary place-making. It is, for example, as a trace of gaps in historical knowledge that the stone refers to events and instances that 'remain unrealised' and hence prompt a listening for the silences of the as yet unhidden Plains place.

Despite the fragmentation and discontinuity of narrative that takes place in 'Stone Hammer Poem', it still displays signs of a longing for narrative as well as the continuing presence of meta-narratives. This is not surprising if we consider firstly that the latter is the imperial-colonial dominant that Kroetsch, the literary archaeologist, wants to violate and write against while, at the same time, being aware that he is writing from within. That is to say, he is situated in and has been subjected to these stories himself. As Kroetsch has written of his relationship to the Plains and Canada as imperial and colonial, 'I was at once resisting and caught inside a story of empire.'<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the longing for narrative also reflects the recurrence of a desire for home as a fixed and coherent place of personal attachment and belonging; a desire to fill the void that leaves the poet at a loss and fuels his exploration of the possibility of a Williamsque 'local pride'. Thus, rather than describing part ten as deviant or a relapse, I would suggest that this field is indicative of the literary archaeologist's personal and emotional involvement in the excavation of the particulars of place. His examination and expression of 'sentiments, love, conscience,

instincts' indicates that he is woven into a local place whose threads he is undoing to try to give shape to a different prairie place; or in other words, a new literary geography.

Because of this need to break down existing forms and seek out new ones, there is a sense of starting over with each of the eleven parts of 'Stone Hammer Poem'. Equally, the poem as a 'whole' marks the beginning of a project of literary archaeology that is developed further in the subsequent long poems of *Field Notes*, *Advice to My Friends*, and *Country and Western*. It is appropriate therefore that this poetic prologue 'ends' with the poet declaring that he is sitting at his desk writing the poems of the prairie place: 'Sometimes I write/ my poems for that/ stone hammer' (8). In significant ways, the subsequent long poem, 'The Ledger', marks a continuation of 'Stone Hammer Poem' and the archaeological project. The title refers to an archaeological fragment from the author's family archive. The ledger in question was kept by the poet's grandfather 'at a watermill in Bruce County, Ontario' and given to the poet by his aunt, Mary O'Connor, 'one afternoon at her house in Edmonton'.<sup>36</sup> As such, 'The Ledger' is not strictly about the prairie place, but it nonetheless traces the westward movement of the author's family and many other immigrant families as well.

As for the telling of this story, it is quite literally palimpsest. In the first edition, the text of the poem is written onto copies of pages of the historical ledger. Moreover, 'The Ledger' is structured around multiple definitions of the word as found in a dictionary. In this way it becomes a series of meditations on the idea of balancing and closing 'the book of final entry' 'that lies permanently in some place'" (CFN, 11 & 26). But rather than achieving closure and fixity, the adding up recurrently 'doesn't balance' and the linearity of the balance sheet columns are broken and transgressed

(CFN, 11). Consequently, the text represents the story of the westward movement as fragmented and polysemous while also un-hiding the personal, environmental, and cultural costs of 'going west' (CFN, 22). For the latter reason, 'The Ledger' reminds the poet that in his genealogical search for a 'local pride' '[t]ombstones are hard/ to kill', that is to say, the slate of the past cannot be wiped clean. Instead the poet is finally reminded that he must be prepared to 'Marry the Terror' that his archaeological enquiry into the past uncovers (CFN, 28). Thematically, 'Seed Catalogue' takes over where 'The Ledger' leaves the reader, while from a geographical perspective, it returns to the location of 'Stone Hammer Poem' and a more detailed examination of how the Canadian Plains were settled.

*Seed Catalogue: artefact, palimpsest, and creation ex nihilo*

In terms of poetic practice and form, 'Seed Catalogue' continues the archaeological enquiry into place that was begun in 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'The Ledger'. But whereas stone and ledger were both found in the family archive, the seed catalogue was unearthed by the author in a public place:

I found a 1917 catalogue in the Glenbow archives in 1975. I translated that seed catalogue into a poem called 'Seed Catalogue'. The archaeological discovery, if I might call it that, brought together for me the oral tradition and the dream of origins.<sup>37</sup>

The translation, or lifting into literary expression, of this local artefact documenting the agrarian settlement of the Plains resulted in a ten-part or -field poem. In keeping with Kroetsch's interest in archaeology and 'the oral tradition', its fields constitute a polyphonic collage of fragments and voices that have been removed from their

original context and re-situated in the landscape of the long poem. In a quite literal sense, this retelling of the history of a local prairie place is a palimpsest. In the first edition, published in 1977, the writer inscribes his text on silkscreen pages reproduced 'from two catalogues released in 1916 and 1922 by McKenzie's Seeds of Brandon, Manitoba.'<sup>38</sup> In this regard, then, lifting to literary expression literally means writing on top of the always already of the place in a process that simultaneously involves un-hiding, erasure, and re-inscription.

Extracts borrowed from a range of oral and written sources are all inscribed on top of the seed catalogue from McKenzie's. We hear the voices and stories of the would-be poet's parents, relatives, and fellow poets, but also those of the local priest and residents speaking in the vernacular. As the list suggests, the fields not only cover a wide range of voices, but also topics and genres. We find fragments of everyday conversations, confessions, private letters, tall tales, and haiku poems touching on topics as wide ranging as gardening, love-making, story-telling, drunkenness, and artistic inspiration, aspiration, and exasperation. The immediate effect on the reader of these displaced and seemingly incongruous fragments is of a disjointed, polyphonic and heterotopic textual topos. However, by placing them side-by-side rather than in a unified and closed narrative hierarchy, the poet brings the different fields of the text into dialogue with each other and invites the reader to make new spatial associations and connections when thinking about the Plains as place and space. Like 'Stone Hammer Poem', this textual artefact is 'writable' in the manner outlined by Roland Barthes and as such encourages the reader to participate in a revisionist telling of the history of a local Plains place.<sup>39</sup>

The history that the fields of 'Seed Catalogue' retell and revise is one of the most prominent and powerful myths of the Plains region: the story of the central



grasslands of North America as garden and town formed out of a conceived and perceived void. As Eli Mandel has remarked, '[t]he stunning paradox in *Seed Catalogue* is the play on everything implied by *creation ex nihilo*.'<sup>40</sup> In a basic sense, the paradox arises from the fact that poet as well as poem is always already in place as suggested by the historical seed catalogue and the recurring figure of the palimpsest. The poem cannot make or write place out of nothing or on a clean slate, a *tabula rasa*, but must write from, against, and on top of 'the already said' that stone, ledger, tombstone, and now seed catalogue represent. As we shall see, it is in large part because of this paradox that the dream of origins, authenticity, and progress that the mythic garden embodies is subverted and displaced in the poem's fields of interrogation. Rather than progressive creation out of nothing in answer to the recurrent topical question of how you grow a garden, prairie town, past, poet etc., the key trope to understanding the text's retelling becomes '*[t]he palimpsest of prairie*' (CFN, 45, italics in original).

#### *Growing Places: garden, town, grid*

Apart from the word 'grow' in the poem's recurrent topical question, the word 'seed' in the title makes the most direct reference to the mythico-social place-making that the poem explores. A significant aspect of growing out of nothing in the case of the Plains is a rhetorical and discursive construction of the place as a new-world garden. We see this in the way most entries have been lifted from the historical seed catalogue advertising the potential and virtues of vegetable and flower seeds. It does so in a hyperbolic rhetoric in which key words that allude to imperial advances are highlighted: '*Copenhagen Market Cabbage*', for example, is presented as a '*new introduction,/[...] a thoroughbred [...] of highest/ pedigree, [...] creating considerable flurry among professional gardeners/ all over the world*' (CFN, 29,

italics in original). The seed not only promises a garden place of traceable origins and pure old-world lineage. The text also reassures us of its universal appeal and application. In addition, the new-world garden is also a place of beauty and wonder: 'No. 2362 – *Imperialis Morning Glory*: "This is the wonderful *Japanese Morning Glory*, celebrated the world over for its *wondrous beauty* of both flowers and foliage"' (CFN, 41, italics in original). A similar rhetorical shaping and promise of domestication can be glimpsed in lyrical flashes such as '[i]nto the dark of January/ the seed catalogue bloomed' (CFN, 30). These extracts show the seed to be a seductive place-making trope in a mythical and meta-physical sense: via the poem it links the historical seed catalogue to a particular and popular story of imperial-colonial enterprise, that is, the Plains as an imaginary new-world Eden.

In addition to a rhetorical shaping of the Plains landscape, the imperial-colonial discourse formation also includes a number of figures that refer to the prairie as a region in which a rational spatial order has been inscribed physically onto the land. Central to this inscription is a number of vertical and horizontal tropes that lend a linear and striating order and sense of place to a space which, from the point of view of a Euro-Canadian settler culture, has commonly been perceived as empty and continually threatening placial erasure. In the realm of the domestic garden, for example, place-making along linear lines takes place along rows that are marked 'with a piece of binder twine' and sweet peas which 'climb [...] the stretched binder twine' (CFN, 45, 30). As for the agrarian garden, the markers of a linear order are barbed wire fences and the geometrical co-ordinates of the cartographic map. The barbed wire trope, which tellingly recurs throughout Kroetsch's long poems, illustrates how the settlers 'give form to this land by running/ a series of posts and three strands/ of barbed wire around a quarter section' (CFN, 38). A similarly rational production of a

socio-political space finds embodiment in 'the home place', which is fixed in the township-and-range system at 'N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian' or 'one and a half mile west of Heisler, Alberta,/ on the correction line road/ and three miles south' (CFN, 38, 30).

These tropes all make reference to the way in which a geometrical conception of space plays an instrumental part in the production of a social space, that is, the imperial-colonial agrarian landscape of the Canadian prairies. However, conceiving of space and place in geometrical and cartographical terms is also instrumentally important to the modern version of the pastoral garden myth. In a move paralleling the widespread pre-settlement perception of the prairies as empty, wild, and uncivilised, it makes land available for colonisation and legitimises territorialisation by conceiving of it as empty space. Furthermore, mapping and shaping the land along linear lines of cartographical coordinates and barbed wire not only transforms space into landscape, it also aids its transfer into the realm of geo-politics and market economics. Land rights and private as well as public ownership are defined through the drawing of borders allowing the land itself to become an object of speculation, desire, and dispute. As we saw in 'Stone Hammer Poem', the genealogy of the land from a Euro-Canadian perspective is defined by ownership of the field that both father and grandfather 'thought was his' and which was passed down '(for a price)'; or perhaps more accurately with 'The Ledger' in mind, at a cost (CFN, 6).

In accordance with the dream of a rationally ordered space outlined above, one possible answer to the question of how you grow a town becomes:

The gopher was the model.

Stand up straight:

Telephone poles

Grain elevators

Church steeples. (CFN, 35)

From a historical perspective, the linear verticality of all four tropes is illuminating on a number of counts. First of all, from the point of view of the settler culture, the tropes possess a verticality which counters the unsettling and alienating placelessness of a topography characterised by horizontality: we are told, for example, that there are '[n]o trees/ around the house./ Only the wind./ Only the January snow./ Only the summer sun' (CFN, 31). Related to this elementary place-giving property, the tropes are also indicative of the production of a particular social space, that is, the colonisation and territorialisation of the Canadian West by European nations and settlers. As symbols of communication, a capitalist market place, and Christian religion, telephone poles, grain elevators, and church steeples make reference to the social practices, values, and beliefs, in sum, the ideology, that informed and continues to inform a Euro-Canadian settler culture's inhabitation of the central grasslands. The vertical tropes recall, in other words, the modern discourse formation that explains the transformation of a perceived empty space into an agrarian landscape of gardens and towns with reference to science, technology, commerce, and Christianity. And as we saw during the discussion of *O Pioneers!*, this transformation has commonly been represented as a mythic narrative of historical progress.

Read in this way, tropes signifying verticality and linearity are suggestive of the attempt by a Euro-Canadian settler culture to define and fix place as garden and town along sets of constant relations. This mythico-social production of space is re-enacted in the representational and symbolic realm of the early *Field Notes* poems in

order to link it to a culturally dominant mode of spatialisation. Here I am not only thinking of the imperial story of garden and town, but also popular and exilic images of the Plains as heartland, bread basket, grid, and agrarian idyll. More specifically in prairie literature, we find the progressive recovery narrative retold in numerous novels, including, as I have mentioned previously, Frederick Groves' *Fruits of the Earth*, Arthur Stringer's *The Prairie Wife*, and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*. But as Dick Harrison has observed, Robert Kroetsch in his novels – and one might add his long poems – ‘expresses impatience with “certain traditional kinds of realism,” presumably because he wishes to escape the assumptions implicit in the realistic fiction which shaped an earlier vision of the prairie.’<sup>41</sup> In his study of Plains fiction, Harrison goes on to point out that as a central figurative and structural element of this vision, the garden mythos and discourse is problematic because it amounts to ‘another way of looking at the prairie without seeing it.’<sup>42</sup>

In a significant sense, then, the story of the Plains as garden and town has contributed to a writing out of existence of the place, or to put it in archaeological terms, to an erasure. For this reason, a need exists for literary geographies that renegotiate the relationship between the place, its representations, and the way it has been constructed discursively. In ‘Seed Catalogue’, for example, the poet quotes advice given to him by his fellow Plains writer Rudy Wiebe: “‘You must lay great black steel lines of/ fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like/ the fiction of the Russian steppes, build a giant/ artefact. No song can do that...’” (CFN, 39). Despite Wiebe’s anti-colonial stance in a novel such as *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), the extract quoted here advocates a traditional European novel form as the medium for lifting a regional landscape to literary expression. That is to say, Wiebe recommends the sort of spatio-textual order that ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ and ‘Seed

Catalogue' seek to fragment and displace.<sup>43</sup> They do so, it would seem, to erase that which erases – established modes of perceiving and representing the region – in an attempt to clear space for literary place-making and the 'discovery' of geographies that resist re-colonising the Plains place. From the point of view of a Kroetschian literary geography this

means, finally, that the form itself must violate itself. The renewal does not come from outside, cannot be brought about by the introduction of new materials into the form. This creature is a porcupine that can only be violated from within. The porcupine of ego. The porcupine of the Safeway novel. The porcupine of English-Canadian self-righteousness [...] And boredom. And self-congratulation. And timidity. And self-deception.<sup>44</sup>

#### *How Do You Erase Place?*

Because of the need to violate existing literary forms from within, it comes as little surprise that the garden mythos and its accompanying notions of origins, authenticity, order, and spatial recovery are contradicted and erased in 'Seed Catalogue'. In accordance with the practice and strategies of literary archaeology, the fields of the text repeatedly interrupt the story of the garden and subvert its tropes. The second stanza of 'Seed Catalogue', for example, throws into doubt any notion or hope that the poet's family may have harboured of cultivating a pastoral garden before the gardening has even got under way. In a moment of contradiction that echoes the opening of 'Stone Hammer Poem', the reader is told, '[t]hen it was spring. Or, no: / then winter was ending' (29). The classical Virgilian movement from winter to spring and the accompanying transformation from wilderness to landscape that features

centrally in *O Pioneers!* is contradicted as soon as it is brought up. Moreover, the reader also learns in the first part of the poem that autumn sets in before the poet has had a chance to learn the art of domestic gardening. The fact is, we are told, that the baseball ‘World Series was in progress’, and ‘[i]t was raining. The road to the graveyard was barely passable’ (CFN, 31). Hence, all that remains of the garden at the end of part one is the spectre of his gardening mother whispering from beyond her grave, ‘[b]ring me the radish seeds’ (31).

Adding to this anti-pastoral and anti-progressive sentiment is a foiling of the seed catalogue’s mythical garden rhetoric by mimicry. The couching of cabbage, squash, and cauliflower in a language of exaggerated promise amounts to subversive, anti-imperial mimicry in the case of, for example, ‘No. 1248 – Hubbard Squash: ““As *mankind* seems to have a *particular fondness* for squash, *Nature* appears to have *especially* provided this *matchless* variety of *superlative flavour*”” (CFN, 32, italics in original). The insubordinate humour in this passage springs from the fact that something as seemingly mundane as squash is depicted in an overstated rhetoric which alludes to a common imperial-colonial practice of equating ‘*mankind*’ with settlers of European descent and viewing Nature as naturally benign to their needs. Through its hyperbolic juxtaposition of language and object, signifier and signified, this and other seed catalogue items not only make the reader smile, they also make a more serious point about how the discourse of empire reaches into everyday language use and influences the way people see and imagine the places they inhabit.

In a similar vein, the gopher becomes an emblem of placial erasure. As we have already seen, its vertical posture signals the inscription of a rational and linear spatial order. Shortly afterwards, however, the small burrowing rodent reappears as an emblem of disappearance, impermanence, and erasure. The verticality of town-

building is undermined when the passage ends, 'Vanish suddenly: the/ gopher was the model' (CFN, 35). In contrast to telephone poles, grain elevators, and church steeples, the gopher, like the badger, is a local inhabitant that goes and lives underground and as such figuratively undermines the imperial-colonial 'growing' of garden and town: 'My father was mad at the badger: the badger was digging holes in the potato patch...', we are told in a narrative passage that portrays the love-hate relationship between the badger and the poet's settler father with humour, irony, and affection (CFN, 31). In this playful yet serious manner, gopher and badger remind the reader, firstly, of the need to undermine and violate the garden and town mythos from within and below. Secondly, they also signal that in the case of the prairies the story lives 'under the ground.'<sup>45</sup> It is, as we shall see, hidden in an archaeological sense as opposed to being visible, transparent, and recordable on the surface of the landscape.

The contradiction and erasure of garden and town that takes place in the first part of 'Seed Catalogue' is perhaps captured most tellingly in a passage that depicts the family homestead as barren, exposed, and unsettling:

No trees

around the house.

Only the wind.

Only the January snow.

Only the summer sun.

The home place:

a terrible symmetry. (CFN, 31)



Like the vanishing gopher, the absence of trees signals the absence or disappearance of a significant spatialising verticality in a topography characterised by horizontality. From a conventional Euro-Canadian perspective, it would be tempting therefore to read the absence of trees and the presence of wind, snow, and sun as indicative of the region's natural treelessness and the place-erasing attributes of a hostile environment that renders settlement precarious and impermanent. Such a reading would place the passage alongside the episode in *O Pioneers!* when the wagon that Alexandra, Carl, and Emil are travelling in disappears into the darkening prairie waste. Like its literary counterpart, it would be seen to attribute a place-threatening spaciousness to a geographical determinism that has commonly been given literary expression through metaphors of the desert, wilderness, and a sea of grass.<sup>46</sup> But as I showed in the previous chapter, a straightforward interpretation of geography as deterministic in accounts of prairie settlement has recurrently had the effect of naturalising and legitimising settlement in addition to voiding and obscuring significant elements of landscape as a socio-cultural construct, for example, salient spatial structures and practices of its pre-settlement inhabitants.

In the context of 'Seed Catalogue', I do not believe that a straightforward deterministic reading of the passage adequately accounts for what the poet is trying to achieve. He is not simply making the point that the natural and phenomenologically experienced spaciousness of the land erases and unsettles garden, grid, and town. Rather I want to suggest that he re-appropriates familiar tropes and figures that stem from the land and its climate, and which the so-called 'realist' writers also made use of. But whereas the latter did so to evoke a place-threatening spaciousness signifying wilderness, bewilderment, and defeat, the primary concern of the would-be poet in 'Seed Catalogue' is with existing literary geographies rather than the 'literal' place.

The palimpsest form of the poem itself suggests as much since it involves *writing* on top of the already said, that is, the culturally well-established notion of creation out of nothing as articulated in a seed catalogue that repeatedly makes promises of a new world garden. This interpretation is corroborated further by images of vanishing and absence that appear a few pages later in a passage stating that the *poem* is ‘a prairie road’ that runs between ‘nowhere and nowhere’ (CFN, 39, my italics). Again, the implication is that the spatial tropes are not referring literally to the prairie place, but rather that the story of town and garden is being written out of existence and, as a result, the literary archaeologist/geographer finds himself in a ‘nowhere’ (CFN, 39).

It is the writing towards this ‘nowhere’ in the realm of literary geography that we are witnessing when the extract quoted above sits alongside a number of other tropes and lines that contradict and erase the garden mythos. In fact, the passage itself contributes to a writing out of existence as it follows immediately after the lines that fix ‘the home place’ along cartographic coordinates (CFN, 30). Because of this juxtaposition, it registers finally a ‘terrible symmetry’ that unsettles the self-contained and fixed home place of grid and garden while at the same time wind, snow, and sun allude to a terrifying placelessness (CFN, 31). Read in this way, the absence of trees and the presence of wind, snow, and sun suggest tropical, narrative, and discursive erasure rather than natural characteristics of the Plains environment. Tellingly, these topographic and climatic tropes possess qualities of invisibility and blankness which metaphorically signal the effects of erasure and violation on the region’s dominant literary landscape. As we shall see in the next part, they do not, however, refer only to the erasure of that which erases. They also allude to a state of being left without a story, that is, in a placeless void which threatens to silence both poet and his poem of place. In the textual topos of ‘Seed Catalogue’, this state is summed up in the phrase,

‘The double hook: / The home place’ (CFN, 41). It implies the question of where the writer of Plains space finds himself once he has un-named the always already of the home place, that is, garden, town, and grid.

*‘No trees’: the absence and presence of origins and a usable past*

In order to understand more fully the erasure and un-naming that precedes the question ‘where is here?’, it is necessary to take a closer look at the significance that the absence of trees holds in ‘Seed Catalogue’. In suggesting placial erasure, their absence alludes to the role that the trope of the tree plays in myths that seek to explain the origins of space and place. One prominent example would be ‘the metaphorical ground where the Tree of Life may grow’ in the literary geography of America that Charles Olson’s maps in the *Maximus Poems*.<sup>47</sup> In a wider cultural sense, one might also think of the tree in Christian mythology. It can be argued that as a symbol of origins and knowledge in the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, the tree is of particular relevance to the present poem. In the literary archaeologist’s attempt to write back towards origins in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’, the tree trope becomes an important signifier of spatial origins, or more precisely, the lack thereof. The significance of the absence as well as the present absence of trees is perhaps articulated most tellingly in the last lines of the poem in which the stanza of the treeless homestead is repeated but this time followed by the lines ‘*Adam and Eve got drowned-/ Who was left?*’ (46, italics in original).

On the one hand, the implication is that Eden as garden, myth, and meta-narrative has been erased and that someone is called for to formulate a different story or myth of the Plains place. Part of the motivation for undertaking this erasure relates back to the point made earlier about violating culturally and artistically dominant

modes of spatial representation and not seeing the land before you. In the case of the biblical tree and the modern meta-narrative of recovery and progress that it refers to in a North American context, the problem is that this story contributes to a naming 'out of existence' of the world that it has been transplanted to (CFN, 34). We hear this, for example, when the local priest 'named/ our world out of existence', that is, the local world of two young lovers who learn that their sexual transgressions on 'the gunny sacks' on top of the granary amount to '*playing dirty*' in the words of the priest (CFN, 33-34, italics in original). By contrast, from the point of view of the would-be poet/lover, the local Plains place does not conform to the spatial origins or cultural history that priest and garden represent. It is partly for this reason, then, that he perceives a need to violate and erase the Christian story and its morals.

In a related fashion, the cultural history of the Plains place amounts to a list of absences if viewed from the perspective of an official canon of Western culture and civilisation. On the extensive list of absences we find, for example, 'silkworms', 'kings and queens', 'pyramids', 'Sartre and Heidegger', 'the Parthenon', 'books', 'ballet and opera', and 'Heraclitus' (CFN, 35-6). Looked at in this way, the prairie becomes a culturally marginal or even non-place; one of those 'most unpromising places, [...] we tend to feel is without history' as suggested by Michel Foucault in *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*.<sup>48</sup> This perceived lack of a usable past is confirmed by the would-be poet of place when he reasons that 'if/ memory is/ and you have/ no memory then/ no meditation/ no song (shit/ we're up against it)' (CFN, 37). If these cultural borrowings and transfers are taken into consideration, then Western modes of history writing and definitions of culture are imperial-colonial in so far as they silence and marginalize salient elements of the prairie place.

In the present poem of place it can be said that they do so by being present even in their absence. The fact that the absent tree is a recurrent trope not just in 'Seed Catalogue' but throughout Kroetsch's long poems suggests that it maintains its own presence in his literary geography of the prairie West. Just as the spectre of the gardening mother lingers despite the failure to grow a garden, so in a poem like 'Mile Zero', the reader learns that in shortgrass country '[t]rees are only a memory', and at the end of 'Sketches of a Lemon' that the tree from which the fruit originates 'is elsewhere' (CFN, 108, 80). As a central trope of culturally and ideologically specific meta-narratives, the tree may be absent in the case of the Plains, but it maintains a presence that continues to influence our thinking about the place and the writing of its spatial history. From the point of view of a politics of representation, it can be argued therefore that the type of erasure undertaken in 'Seed Catalogue' amounts to a discursive act of anti-colonial or -imperial resistance on the part of the poet. On the one hand, the absence of trees and the drowning of Adam and Eve mark the erasure of a culturally specific myth of spatial origins, a genius loci, a first place, a mile zero. On the other hand, they also mark the spectral presence of the myth of garden and grid. With this observation in mind we can then see why the poet in his enquiry into the home place describes it as a 'double hook'; a place which the poem violates and erases with some success yet can never completely escape. Moreover, as we shall see in the next part, the erasure of that which erases does not lead straightforwardly to a positively defined place of presence.

*On the Road to Nowhere: tracing the prairies 'Between nowhere and nowhere'*

The placelessness that follows in the wake of the erasure and un-naming of garden and town is explored most directly in a number of textual fragments that seek to answer or at least assess the possibility of answering the questions: 'How/ do you

*grow a garden?*’ and *‘How do you grow a poet?’* (CFN, 45 & 39). In a telling passage in the sixth of the poem’s ten parts the voice of the aspiring local poet answers the question of how you grow a poet in and of the prairie place:

This is a prairie road.

This road is the shortest distance

Between nowhere and nowhere.

This road is a poem. (CFN, 39)

If the poem becomes a stone in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’, then the corresponding metaphor in ‘Seed Catalogue’ conflates poem and road by pointing self-referentially to ‘this’ poem as ‘a prairie road’ and to the road as a ‘poem’. Figuratively, the place-erasing nowhere of the physical Plains landscape becomes the nowhere of the textual topos in which the would-be poet is engaged in a process of erasure of the tropes, narratives, and myths of an established cultural, including literary, history. The void that this process reveals ‘[b]etween nowhere and nowhere’ is significant in that it reminds the reader of the obstacles facing the poet archaeologist who after un-writing wants to write ‘new geographies’. As the extended spatial metaphor suggests, the placelessness of the nowhere he finds himself in is linguistic, literary, and cultural.

Because the road of the prairie poem in this passage runs ‘between nowhere and nowhere’, that is to say, it leads nowhere and signifies nothing but absence, some critics have suggested that the Plains landscape becomes a mere vehicle for language’s inability to signify in the case of ‘Seed Catalogue’. The question is, in other words, whether the metaphorical conflation of landscape and language signals that the struggle for a literary geography of the Plains is becoming confined to

linguistic and textual space and therefore is about language rather than place. In his article 'Prairie Poetry and Metaphors of Plain/s Space' Laurie Ricou appears to suggest as much when he writes on 'Seed Catalogue' that 'the very inadequacy of landscape becomes a resource' in the sense that the abstract 'plain plains space' becomes a metaphor for 'language's elusiveness'.<sup>49</sup> In a sort of deconstructivist move, the region's topography is made to serve as a figurative and semantic repository for an exploration of the linguistic sign's inability to signify reliably and stably, and it follows, articulate a sense of place. Of Ed Dorn's 'Idaho Out' and Kroetsch's 'Seed Catalogue', Ricou argues that 'they invert the original direction of a search for regional metaphor and, in looking for a metaphor for language, turn to the abstract plains space that was once the primary subject.'<sup>50</sup> This finally leads Ricou to conclude that '[p]lace is no longer the subject. The definitive regional poem is an antiregional poem. It contains the regional metaphors – they are catalogued because the subject is language itself.'<sup>51</sup>

Even though Ricou rightly points to the impact that a negative capability stemming from semantic undecidability may have on the writing of literary geographies, his reading takes a linguistic turn that is too reductive when he suggests that the proper subject of the poem is no longer a search for metaphors for place but 'for language'. If one accepts this conclusion, it is difficult to see how one can adequately account for the ways in which language, including its elusiveness, is productive in a discursive sense; that is to say, how it can both create and un-create space, and in so doing, reproduce, obscure, un-hide, and resist political and ideological aspects of place and space. For the latter reason, I want to argue, as I have done throughout this chapter, that the type of deconstruction practised by Kroetsch in 'Seed Catalogue' violates always already literary geographies in the discursive and

political sense in which Jacques Derrida initially conceived of this strategy of critical analysis.<sup>52</sup>

In terms of 'Seed Catalogue's inquiry into the possibility of lifting a local Plains place to literary expression, we not only find several examples of how garden rhetoric and tropes shape the place, but also of how the text contradicts, erases, and subverts these culturally dominant images and narratives. As we have already seen, the reader witnesses the vanishing acts of local particulars such as gopher and badger and the erasure of 'January snow' (CFN, 31). In a significant sense, all of these tropes are indicative of an erasure that not only clears space for 'the other garden', but also creates a void that is potentially placeful in a negative sense (CFN, 41). It is for this reason, I believe, that the search for placial metaphors cannot be said to have been altogether abandoned nor has the enquiry into the prairies as a physical, inhabited, and literary place been displaced by a purely linguistic inquiry into 'language's elusiveness'.

It is easy to see, however, how one might reach such a conclusion when looking at the story of the prairie place as it unfolds in part six of 'Seed Catalogue'. At this point the place is fast becoming a non-place in the sense of a void and language is failing to signify, leaving poet and poem without story and trope. This suggests that one imminent danger facing the poet trying to locate the prairie place in the space 'between nowhere and nowhere' is a silencing of his stories and voice. In the next stanza, stories are represented by a porcupine that tries 'to cross the road' between nowhere and nowhere only to end up 'dead in the ditch' (39). This incident is perhaps best understood as a case of narrative road-kill through the intertextual reference it makes to Kroetsch's essay 'The Exploding Porcupine'. In the essay, as I mentioned above, the porcupine is emblematic of the violence that Kroetsch thinks is



necessary to explode traditional forms of Canadian narratives, self-understanding, and identity.

On the consequences of narrative violence, he makes the apt point that '[t]he ultimate violence that might be done to story is silence.'<sup>53</sup> That this silence is befalling the would-be poet becomes apparent in the third of the five stanzas that make up the 'nowhere' passage at the halfway point of the poem. Here the reader is told that of the poet 'no record/ of his having traversed/ the land' can be found (CFN, 39). With its suggestion of erasure this trope extends the metaphorical conflation of the blankness of land and page, road and poem. The implication is that the voice of the poet as literary archaeologist and geographical explorer is vanishing '*under the quick erasure/ of snow*' (CFN, 45). The blank whiteness of the snow trope makes the prairie West of the poem '*a winter place*', that is, a space in which the efforts of the poet to grow a garden, a town, and a past have been 'whitened' out metaphorically (CFN, 45, 46).

The 'placelessness' of space and language that follows the erasure of the dominant stories of the prairie home place does not constitute an absolute void however. Instead it is placeless in a manner that parallels the 'know (not know)' passage in 'Stone Hammer Poem' (CFN, 5). In the void we find traces of its place-making potential:

a scarred

page, a spoor of wording

a reduction to mere black

and white/ a pile of rabbit

turds that tells us

all spring long

where the track was (CFN, 39)

With the erasure of his stories, the silencing of his voice, and the pervasiveness of death and placelessness throughout the poem, the aspiring prairie poet is left with mere traces of 'where the track was' in stark contrast to the great black steel lines of fiction that Rudy Wiebe advocated as necessary for constructing a literary geography of the Plains.<sup>54</sup> In another metaphorical conflation of language and landscape all that is left on the white(ning) page of the literary landscape are spoors of words and turds; effluence and excrements in a void rather than the positive presence and logocentric self-definition of grid and garden. But as the word spoor suggests, the writer as literary archaeologist is not completely silenced. He is still under way traversing the prairies in search of the traces, fragments, and absences that may provide clues to a different and differential history of the place, or to put it in deconstructive terms, a presence in absence. As it turns out, the spoor is a sign that the nowhere that surrounds the post-garden prairie writer does not amount to an absolute void, absence, silence, or death. A few pages later the reader is told that

*West is a winter place.*

*The palimpsest of prairie*

*under the quick erasure*

*of snow, invites a flight. (45)*

These lines, found at the beginning of the tenth and final field of the poem, situate the placelessness that follows the erasure of the garden mythos and the silencing of the local poet in relation to the dialogic movements of recording and erasing, finding and losing, and growing and vanishing that characterise the genealogical mapping of the prairies in both 'Seed Catalogue' and 'Stone Hammer Poem'. For this reason, I want to suggest in the last part of this chapter that *'the palimpsest of prairie'* is the key trope to understanding the revisionist telling of the story of the Plains place that Kroetsch undertakes in his early long poems. Just as 'winter place' and the 'erasure of snow' allude both to un-naming and silencing, so the subsequent lines of flight are suggestive of re-inscription in both a positive and a negative sense. Consequently, the prairie place of 'Seed Catalogue' maintains, on the one hand, a positive presence in the form of 'the other garden', and, on the other, a negative presence in absence. Because of the way in which the poem fails to tell and complete the story of how to grow a home place, the literary prairie becomes in a significant sense a non-place, that is, a place defined by absences. I believe therefore that if an argument is to be made for the inadequacy of language as a resource – a creation out of nothing - it must be in the sense of a negative capability. But even so, this is not merely a question of semantics. By reading the non-place Plains, 'the other garden', and the spectre of the edenic garden as parts of a palimpsest inscription on top of a historical seed catalogue, it becomes clear that it also serves a discursive and political purpose.

*Lines of Flight I: un-hiding 'the other garden'*

In the last third of 'Seed Catalogue' we can identify a place-making strategy that seeks, firstly, to un-hide aspects of the prairie landscape that were written out of existence by the story of garden and town. Following the erasure of this story, un-hiding may be read as a positive response to the placeless void that the would-be poet

finds himself in. In the words of the author, the un-hiding exemplifies how writers may not only ‘unname’ and ‘uninvent the world’ but also ‘rename’ it by ‘un-concealing’ local particulars.<sup>55</sup> The place in question is ‘the other garden’, an inhabited and vernacular prairie place that takes as its face native brome grass and a polyphony of local voices (CFN, 41). In the face of the placelessness that characterises the passage preceding it – the road-poem between nowhere and nowhere – the other garden marks a new spatialising departure or ‘flight’ within a palimpsest textual topos. As the text notes, the other garden marks ‘[t]he end of winter’ and a return of ‘seeding/time’ (CFN, 40). This time imported seeds such as ‘*Imperialis Morning Glory*’ and the colonial rhetoric describing their ‘*wondrous beauty*’ are replaced by indigenous brome grass and a plain prose style:

“No amount of cold will kill it. It *withstands* the summer suns. Water may stand on it for several weeks without apparent injury. The roots push through the soil, throwing up new plants continually. It *starts quicker* than other grasses in the spring. *Remains green* longer in the fall. *Flourishes under absolute neglect.*” (CFN, 40, italics and quotation marks in original)

Unlike the imported flower and vegetable seeds, brome grass thrives in what seems placeless conditions from the perspective of a colonial garden rhetoric. The line ‘[f]lourishes/ *Under absolute neglect*’ is not only suggestive of a presence in the placeless void that follows the erasure of garden and grid. Along with the lines “No amount of cold will kill it. It *withstands* the summer suns’ and ‘[r]emains green longer in the fall’, it also signals resistance, resilience, and survival. These qualities are not only important in filling the void but also in differentiating the common Plains

landscape from its colonial and national counterpart. They are key to the writing into existence of a region which, because it does not conform to traditional Western notions of landscape, history, and culture, has been marginalized and made invisible by those very notions. As we saw above, these are the tropes and stories that in a literary context, according to Dick Harrison, fail to see the prairie landscape on the ground and thus name the experience of settlers such as Kroetsch's own family out of existence.

From a cultural and discursive perspective, then, the brome grass trope becomes emblematic of a resistance to a borrowing of place-making strategies and practices that are imperial-colonial. In addition to garden, grid, and town, we may also recall at this point the imperial transfer of landscape imagery and narrative structures that shape the literary Plains place in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*. One thing that these borrowed acts of naming share, according to Kroetsch, is 'a concealed other experience' which obscures local experience while positing origins and authenticity:

The Canadian writer's particular predicament is that he works with a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own, and not a borrowing. But just as there was in the Latin word a concealed Greek experience, so there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American.<sup>56</sup>

In his essays Kroetsch repeatedly likens this state of concealment to being caught inside someone else's story, in this case the imperial-colonial narrative of grid and garden, and wanting to resist and, as we have seen, erase or explode it from within in order to be able to trace one's own experience and story:

I was caught in a story that I did not even recognize as story, because I did not know how stories retell themselves. I did not know then, as my father and grandfather did not know before me, or seemed not to know, that their small empires were inherited or filched from the Cree Indians, who had in turn inherited or taken by force from the Blackfoot that same empire of grass and poplar bluffs and herds of buffalo. I was at once resisting and caught inside a story of empire.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout my reading of 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'Seed Catalogue', I have tried to show how both texts trace the complex intercultural and transnational genealogy of the prairies through an exploration of local particulars. In doing so, they not simply discover clues to a different story of place, but also gaps, silences, and layers that disrupt the dominant, always already 'story of empire'. It is in this latter sense of exploring and exploding place from within that Kroetsch can talk of erasure as un-creating into existence:

In recent Canadian fiction the major writers resolve the paradox – the painful tension between appearance and authenticity – by the radical process of demythologising the systems that threaten to define them. Or, more comprehensively, they uninvent the world.<sup>58</sup>

Demythologising the imperial-colonial borrowings and translations that 'systems' refer to here does not only mean silencing the concealed other experience of the 'homonymous American and English languages that keep him [the Canadian] from

hearing his own tongue'. Following the contradiction and erasure of the stories of garden, grid, and town, the literary geographer also begins to re-name the un-named. As suggested by the brome grass trope, one way, but not the only way, 'Seed Catalogue' does so is by lifting to literary expression and giving voice to an inhabited prairie experience. The process of un- and re-naming that this involves, Kroetsch sets out in more detail during a discussion of the Euro-Canadian Plains novel, *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925) by Frederick Grove:

The moment of unnamings with its potential for renaming occurs twice in *Settlers*, and this in the marshland itself, that unshaped, unmapped, unnamed space [...] The repetition of the two scenes suggests ritual unnamings and a renaming into new lives in a new world. And the paradox is that the new names are exact homonyms for the old ones. The signifier sounds as it has always sounded. But the signified has shifted radically. Now it can be joined again with its signifier; name and object come together, the new life is possible.<sup>59</sup>

From a cultural and discursive point of view, this extract proposes that 'the other garden' of brome grass and local voices marks an opportunity to re-name after un-naming and to join signifier and signified again in the un-named space of the poem. In seeming contrast to the fragmented, discontinuous, and polyphonic topos of 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'Seed Catalogue', the notion of joining again to make 'the new life' possible implies that an authentic and unified prairie experience can be created in something resembling an originary moment once the 'inauthentic' experience of garden and grid has been unnamed.

The shifting of the signified that joining again requires may be held up as an example of what Diane Tiefensee identifies as Kroetsch's predilection or desire for the sort of binary structures that are characteristic of Western structuralist thinking.<sup>60</sup> Despite the author's intention to demythologise and deconstruct, signifier and a signified still come back together to assert a unified presence of 'new lives in a new world'. Thus, if one was to restrict one's reading of the poem's literary landscape to the perspective of 'the other garden', Kroetsch's brand of deconstruction – his un- and re-naming – could be described as a straightforward process of destruction followed by construction, erasure followed by re-inscription, absence followed by presence. But as we shall see in the final passages of this chapter, the other lines of flight that the last field of 'Seed Catalogue' lists make it clear that such a straightforward process of placial erasure followed by creation does not adequately account for the literary Plains place of Kroetsch's early long poems.

#### *Giving Voice(s) to a Vernacular Plains Place*

Before I return to the question of placial erasure and creation, however, it is pertinent to look briefly at the other key element of 'the other garden'. It involves listening for and giving voice to the expressions and cadences of local speech and story-telling. Just as the description of brome grass does, so the plain, metaphor-less prose of the second fragment of the last field demonstrates how the poem posits and values the presence of a vernacular place and experience. Again, it does so as part of an attempt to lift a local environment to expression and articulate a local pride that counters the 'concealed other experience' of the story of empire and the placelessness that follows its erasure:



“Dear Sir,

*The longest brome grass I remember seeing was one night in Brooks. We were on our way up to the Calgary Stampede, and reached Brooks about 11 P.M., perhaps earlier because there was still a movie on the drive-in screen. We unloaded Cindy, and I remember tying her up to the truck box and the brome grass was up to her hips. We laid down in the back of the truck – on some grass I pulled by hand – and slept for about three hours, then drove into Calgary.*

*Amie”* (CFN, 46)

Despite the letter’s formal format, its tone of voice is exemplary of everyday speech as it is voiced in several fragments throughout the poem. The hired man, for example, asks while laughing at the poet as a young boy, ‘how/ in hell did you manage to fall of a horse that was *standing still?*’ (CFN, 29, italics in original). In a similar colloquial style, a group of ‘A1 Hard Northern Bullshitters’ recount the story of ‘the woman who buried/ her husband with his ass sticking out of the ground’, and poets of the Western Canadian vernacular, Al Purdy and Jim Bacque, make appearances and take poetry into the extra-textual world (CFN, 36). Purdy, for his part, engages in a bout of ecstatic performance poetry by ‘shouting poems at the paying/ customers’ and ‘gallop[ing] a Cariboo horse’ through an upmarket French restaurant in urban Edmonton (CFN, 40). Likewise, Bacque perplexes a woman waiting in an airport terminal by telling her the story of how ‘Bronc-Busting Champion/ of the world’ and ‘King of All/Cowboys’, Pete Knight, ‘Got/ killed – by a horse./ He fell off’ (CFN, 42).

It is noticeable how these vernacular voices parody the myth of the cowboy, thus contributing to an ongoing subversion of culturally dominant myths of the West. Through the use of parody, the voices furthermore cast poets in the role of westering anti-heroes who are in the process of reciting an anti-poem of the West if judged against the standards of such commonplace and overarching Western narratives as those of the cowboy and the garden. In relation to these acts of subversion and resistance, the vernacular voices are also indicative of the way in which the text associates speech with an immediate presence. The lines ‘We silence words/ by writing them down’ allude to the privileging of speech over writing while at the same time acknowledging the paradox and irony that lies in the fact that the poem remains a highly literary artefact, even as it gives voice to ‘the oral tradition’ and makes the anti-literary literary: ‘Son, this is a crowbar [...] I want you to take that/ crowbar and driver [sic!] 1,156 holes/ in that gumbo/ And the next time you want to/ write a poem/ we’ll start the haying’ (CFN, 42, 38). Despite this paradox, the text still affords enough prominence to vernacular speech that it is reasonable to suggest that its literary landscape displays a phonocentric predilection.<sup>61</sup> This is linked in part, I believe, to a desire to assert presence in the absence that follows the subversion and erasure of common Western myths and narratives, and a corollary ambition to lift to expression and make visible and audible a local Plains place which has been rendered invisible by Western modes of history writing and cultural, including literary, canon formation.

From the point of view of a literary geography, the vernacular voices of ‘Seed Catalogue’ may be said to contribute to a landscape that is polyphonic in a Bakhtinian sense. As Simona Bertacco explains in her study of Robert Kroetsch’s writing, ‘[n]arrative discourse, for Bakhtin, is a polyphony of voices, both inside and outside

the text, establishing a relationship of dialogue with the external world.’<sup>62</sup> Nowhere is this dialogics clearer than in the case of Al Purdy who performs poetry in an unusual setting. By noting how Purdy takes poetry into and acts it out in public, the poem points to itself as a literary artefact that potentially may be turned into a weapon – the poem as stone maul. It may be used to defamiliarise and destabilise an established place by violating language norms and conventions for acceptable social and literary behaviour, ‘The waitress asked us to leave. She was rather insistent’ (CFN, 40).

Purdy and the poetic voice’s ‘piss up’ in the restaurant may thus be seen as an example of the discursive and political edge that the vernacular voices and tropes possess within the polyphonic textual topos (CFN, 41). The voices of ‘the other garden’ are suggestive of how the dialogue that takes place between the fragments of this and other texts as well as between text and the external world implicates the literary landscape in a discursive and social production of space. There is a sense, therefore, in which the everyday, colloquial speech acts of the poem articulate, or even enact, a resistance to socially and culturally normative forms of behaviour and dominant ways of perceiving, representing, and inhabiting the prairies. In the context of ‘Seed Catalogue’ the voices that utter these speech acts may be said to contribute to a politicisation of a poetics. Despite Kroetsch’s insistence that violence and erasure is first and foremost formal and literary, the field-note poetry’s formal experiments involving un-hiding, fragmentation, disjuncture, and palimpsest layering nonetheless seek to lift a local landscape to expression and out of a position of cultural marginality and invisibility.

### *Lines of Flight II: the spectre of the garden*

The previous two parts have demonstrated that in the context of ‘the palimpsest of prairie’ the other garden of brome grass and vernacular voices represents a type of

positive place-making. Inscribing it in the fields of the text reflects a desire for and anxiety about being as a full and immediate presence in the face of the 'nowhere' that follows in the wake of the erasure of traditional tropes and narratives; elements which in the writing of imperial-colonial histories and literatures have helped render the prairies marginal and invisible. It is as part of this Williamsque search for a local pride, then, that positive place-making must be understood as discursively and politically motivated even if it is part of a literary geography that claims first and foremost to be concerned with form. It must be noted, however, that the other garden cannot fill the void that follows the erasure of garden, grid, and town in a straightforward manner. Nor can it stand on its own as a full, immediate presence in the tradition of Western logo- and phonocentrism. One of the main reasons for this is the spectre of the edenic garden. Its recurring presence signals to the reader that the story of the Canadian Plains is always already imperial-colonial in both a historical and linguistic sense.

Garden, town, and grid cannot simply be erased and displaced because they are the always already of the story of empire that the poet grew up with and which taught him how to see and understand the landscape around him. We saw this towards the end of 'Stone Hammer Poem' in the way that both father and son projected their longing for a fixed sense of place and spatial origins onto the stone that was kept 'in a raspberry basket' on the back porch and later on the poet's desk (CFN, 7 & 8). Similarly, in the first part of 'Seed Catalogue' we hear the gardening mother whispering from beyond her grave, '[b]ring me/the radish seeds' (CFN, 31). The spectre of the mother's garden appears again in the first passage of the poem's final field. Like its counterpart in 'Stone Hammer Poem', it also allows punctuation, narration, and lyricism in addressing questions of origins, authenticity, and belonging.

The sweat peas ‘climbing the stretched/ binder twine by/ the front porch’ offer the poet a lesson in domestic place-making in answer to the by now ambiguous question, ‘How/ do you grow a garden?’ (CFN, 45). Not only do the sweet peas open the poet’s senses to the smells and colours of the prairie home place and instil in him an appreciation of hard manual labour and toil. They are also emblematic of the value, beauty, and dignity that he has come to associate with domestic gardening. In the words of the poetic voice, the sweat peas of his mother’s garden ‘taught me the smell/ of morning, the grace/ of your tired/ hands [...] the/ colour of prairie grass...taught me the smell/ of my sweating armpits’ (CFN, 45).

The first point to be made here is that because domestic gardening has taught him how to see, inhabit, and value place, the poet cannot simply abandon the sense of place and belonging that it represents. The spectre of his deceased mother’s garden follows him throughout the poem even as he un-names and insists on resisting garden as Eden. The aborted gardening of the mother who died when the poet was still a child may be said to function as a nostalgic locus of a longing to belong, a symbol of the lost possibility of a first place, a *mile zero*, or a *genius loci*. In the present fragment, the recurrence of the ‘binder twine’ trope, the vertically climbing sweat peas, and an intensity of feeling evoked by a pervasive lyricism all signal a longing for a home place whose spatial order and cohesion sets it apart from and is challenged by most of the other spatial tropes that make up the palimpsest and polyphonic fields of ‘Seed Catalogue’.

The second point to be made is that both the mother’s domestic garden and ‘the other garden’ remain gardens in Kroetsch’s deconstruction of the ‘story of empire’ from within. Just as they are literally inscribed on top of the historical seed catalogue’s rhetoric of imperial-colonial gardening, so as signifiers they also bear

within them a trace of the edenic or paradisaal garden that define them in a structuralist sense. Paradoxically, then, even though they seek to debunk and displace the imperial-colonial story of garden and grid, they still signal a longing for place as enclosed, fixed, and unified and for a placial presence that is immediate and full. They refer, in other words, to an essentialist and metaphysical conception of place in the tradition of Western logocentrism: place as self-identical and organised around a centre which holds all, even differences and diversity, and is at once inside and beyond.

In the context of the prairie palimpsest, it is partly for these reasons that neither the other nor the domestic garden can straightforwardly fill the void of the 'nowhere' or stand alone as places onto themselves. To return to the question of placial erasure and creation that I raised above, we can say that no straightforward process of un-naming and re-naming, destruction and construction, or absence and presence is available to the literary archaeologist. Just as the history of the prairie place that unfolds in the poem resists the mythos of garden and grid through contradiction, erasure, and renaming, so the spectre of the mother's garden reveals how the poet continues to be under the influence of garden as Eden and paradise, that is, of place as enclosed, unified, fixed, and of traceable origins. In literary terms I am thinking here of the type of landscape garden that Alexandra Bergson's homestead epitomises in *O Pioneers!*: "[w]hen you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds' (OP, 84).

One obvious irony of the notion of re-naming after un-naming by rejoining a changed signified with its signifier, then, is that it risks reproducing the logocentric and self-identifying presence of garden and grid which in its imperial-colonial

incarnation oppresses and obscures both the particulars and the disjunctures of history. In 'Seed Catalogue' we see the latter happening, for example, in the case of hyperbolic garden rhetoric and the priest who named 'our world out of existence' (CFN, 35).<sup>63</sup> As the extract from *O Pioneers!* directly above demonstrates, we also see it in the case of the agrarian idyll that marks Alexandra's originary transformation of wilderness into garden at the end of 'The Wild Land' and the beginning of 'Neighboring Fields'. What these placial representations share is an inclination to idealise and reify a certain progressivist story of place that relegates to the periphery or into obscurity historical particulars such as land speculation and Indian removal that may undermine them and open place up to the world by revealing the forces and costs of empire and nation building.

It might be suggested therefore that if the rejoining of signifier and signified was as straightforward as the extract on Grove's *The Settlers of the Marsh* indicates, then it would in effect reproduce rather than deconstruct binary pairs such as garden as edenic or other, and simply invert the hierarchical relationship between its parts. It would mean privileging the other garden over the edenic garden, thus corroborating Diane Tiefensee's argument that 'setting up a system of binary pairs and prioritising one term of each pair over its "other" can never subvert the metaphysical implications of conventional narrative [...] and Presence will relentlessly assert itself through the negation that elevates one term over its other.'<sup>64</sup> The 'metaphysical implications of conventional narrative' that Tiefensee refers to have to do with the repression of differences as she makes abundantly clear in the conclusion of her analysis of Kroetsch and his critics: 'If his criticism, literary theory, and fiction epitomize Canadian postmodernism', then it 'is every bit as repressive of ex-centrics and

supportive of those within power as are the traditional modes of thought that Kroetsch claims to reject and resists.<sup>65</sup>

In contrast to Tiefensee I believe 'Seed Catalogue' does demonstrate that the story of the Plains place cannot be conceived of in terms of neatly demarcated binaries nor as a parochial place of repressive logocentric self-definition. 'The palimpsest of prairie' does not straightforwardly prioritise the other garden over its mythic counterpart. It recognises that the history of the place remains a product of an incomplete and unsettling process of inscription and erasure by historical forces. Conceiving of spatial history in this way not only accounts for the influence and cost of the mythico-social place-making of garden, town, and grid, including their spectral presence. It also opens the local Plains place up to the world and acknowledges that its story remains partially hidden and unknown. Thus, if one takes a less philosophical and more historicist view than Tiefensee, it quickly becomes apparent that any sense of a local pride in Kroetsch's literary prairies is shot through with inter- and trans-cultural borrowings, exchanges, and encounters that situate it in relation to the outside world.

Most notably, perhaps, the place is marked by transatlantic transfers and returns. Towards the end of 'Seed Catalogue', this aspect of the Albertan prairie is considered through a story of how the poet's cousin returned to the 'Old Country' during the Second World War to bomb, without knowing it, the town where his maternal grandmother was born (CFN, 44). This return of the new world leads the poet archaeologist to conclude that the 'forgetfulness' of history is indeed 'a strange muse' and the 'shell/ exploding/ in the black sky' over Cologne 'a/ strange planting' since it marks the creation of an old-world void by a new world power (CFN, 43). This reversal in the direction of transatlantic travel and in the power to erase/make



place becomes another example of ‘the terrible symmetry’, irony, and ‘forgetfulness’ of history (CFN, 44). Like ‘The Ledger’, the incident reminds us once again that Kroetsch’s genealogical enquiry into the Plains ‘doesn’t balance’ and that it un-conceals differences, gaps, and hidden particulars (CFN, 11). In turn, these make it less repressive than the culturally prevalent modes of thinking and writing region and nation that it resists and rejects. It might even be argued that Kroetsch’s complex, paradoxical, and ultimately undecidable genealogy of a local Plains place un-conceals historical forces and material costs that an analysis premised solely on Derrida’s deconstructive notions of generalised writing and difference may struggle to account for.

Finally, the extract on naming from Kroetsch’s essay on Grove’s novel also suggests that early long poems such as ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’ are in search of an authentic prairie experience to displace what becomes by implication the ‘inauthentic’ experience of the story of empire. As we have seen, both poems attempt to do so through a genealogical enquiry that seeks to un-hide the particulars of the local landscape for example stone, ledger, and seed catalogue and, by lifting them to literary expression, reconnect signifier and signified. But as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this chapter, this line of enquiry in fact reveals that such Euro-Canadian notions of authenticity and origins are flawed and problematic. As part of a Western spatial discourse, authenticity is not only associated with metaphysical notions of truth and genuineness, but also origins, continuity, purity, and self-identical presence. And as ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’ amply demonstrate, such notions serve to render unusable the Plains place and its history to a significant degree because they represent it ‘out of existence’ and obscure the fact that its landscape is a cultural construct that comes ‘for a price’ (CFN, 34, 8).

This culturally specific notion of authenticity is, furthermore, not in evidence in the historical processes of spatialisation that have shaped the Great Plains landscape. The genealogical enquiry does not uncover a continuous and coherent lineage back to a moment of originary creation. Instead both of the early field-note poems acknowledge that the lifting to expression of stone, hammer, ledger, and seed catalogue is a literary undertaking in the first place. It involves the production of an artefact that un-conceals a fragmented, discontinuous, and palimpsestically layered story of place which is slippery and contested historically, epistemologically, and linguistically. Even when this literary geography aspires to originary creation out of nothing as in the case of the domestic and the other garden, the spectral presence and the cost of the imperial-colonial narrative are always already there. Whether visible or not, they remind the literary archaeologist that he is always already in place and must continue to resist the myth of garden, grid, and town in his search for a new narrative of place that avoids reproducing an overarching and repressive meta-narrative.

*Lines of Flight III: 'west is a winter place'*

In the last part I argued that the spectre of the edenic garden signals to the place-seeking poet that the other garden cannot stand alone and that he remains caught inside a story of empire that he must continue to resist. It is appropriate therefore that the third of part ten's alphabetically listed passages returns to the question of erasure and voiding, thus 'completing' the movement of the prairie palimpsest set out at the beginning of the poem's final field in the phrases 'a winter place' and 'under the quick erasure/ of snow, invites a flight' (CFN, 45). Tellingly, part '(c)' makes this return by repeating a stanza that appeared earlier in the poem in a move that mirrors Grove's repetition of the central marshland scene in *Settlers of the Marsh*:

No trees/  
around the house,  
only the wind.  
Only the January snow.  
Only the summer sun. (CFN, 31 & 46)

On its first appearance this stanza follows immediately after and contradicts the notion of the home place as fixed along cartographic co-ordinates. Accordingly, its last lines express an unsettling sense of place, 'The home place:/ a terrible symmetry' (CFN, 31). In doing so, the stanza enacts 'Seed Catalogue's' deconstruction of the myth of garden, grid, and town, as well as representations of this myth in the form of recovery narratives of teleological progress underpinned by science, technology, commerce, and religion. It exemplifies, in other words, the early long poems' ideological critique of spatialisation on the Canadian prairies as a creation out of nothing.

On its second appearance the stanza concludes using a different line from the passage in which the local priest names the Plains world of the adolescent poet and his lover/muse 'out of existence': 'Adam and Eve got drowned' (CFN, 34). This line implies the un-naming of a dominant borrowed narrative that has helped obscure and marginalise a local and inhabited prairie place. However, the last line of the poem goes on to add a revealing afterthought in the form of a question, '-/who was left?' Once again, the nowhere and silence that follows the un-naming of a powerful garden narrative is, on the one hand, potentially placeful. As was the case in 'Stone Hammer Poem', the question addresses the open on the other side of the unnamed, which is the open field of the blank page, the as yet unconcealed and unwritten poem of place. In

both 'Stone Hammer Poem' and 'Seed Catalogue', we see how the literary archaeologist uses this space for imaginative speculation, noticing with William Carlos Williams what is 'close to the nose' and lifting local particulars to literary expression in an attempt to articulate a local pride.<sup>66</sup>

On the other hand, by asking who is left and leaving the field open, the text also signals that the prairie remains a 'nowhere' and a non-place defined by absences to a significant extent. The risk of being silenced and left without a story in the wake of un-naming immediately springs to mind as does the absence of someone to tell the other story. Moreover, the passage may also be said to allude to the kind of void we first encountered in 'Stone Hammer Poem' through the phrase 'know (not know)' and later in 'Seed Catalogue' through a number of tropes, for example, 'the January snow', 'erasure/ of snow', and 'winter place' (CFN, 5, 45, 46). The apparent contradiction of the former let it be known that the history of the place is truncated by gaps of not knowing, which in a Foucauldian sense both demarcate the limits of and interrupt conventional positivist histories of place. It is in the same spirit that the latter tropes contribute to the contradiction and erasure of one such conventional narrative, the progressive story of the Plains as garden, grid, and town out of nothing.

As we saw above, this erasure culminates in a depiction of the 'prairie road' poem as 'the shortest distance/ Between nowhere and nowhere' (CFN, 39). Here the void does not just signal erasure but also that the other garden is surrounded by a void and silence, it is but 'a spoor of wording' (CFN, 39). Hence, the notion of the Plains as a place of absences, a nowhere, or non-place not only helps explain why the other garden of brome grasses and vernacular voices cannot stand on its own as full and immediate presence. It also reminds the reader that a significant part of the place and its story remains hidden, invisible, and 'under the ground' in a literal as well as

metaphorical sense. Its telling requires therefore that the literary archaeologist possesses a negative capability. He must face, on the one hand, the anxiety that accompanies the impossibility and failure of answering the question of how you grow a garden, a prairie town, a poet etc. On the other, he must also accept that void and absence stir a desire in him to fill it with presence and fix place. As a writer, he has to come to terms with, in other words, 'not know' as historical fact and epistemological as well as creative condition (CFN, 5).

Read in this way, part ten demonstrates how the figure of the palimpsest is key to understanding the early field poems' revisionist telling of the story of the prairie place. More than any other trope the palimpsest of prairie distils into a few lines the multiple and polyvalent ways in which un- and renaming is both a positive and negative undertaking. Tellingly, Kroetsch stops his enquiry into the prairie place on a note that suggests the possibility and necessity as well as the limits and insufficiency of naming place and space. In doing so, the last lines appear incidentally to prefigure his later assessment that 'I had in effect commenced a series of related poems that would in devious ways seek out the forms sufficient to the project (I leave it nameless) announced by Wordsworth and Whitman and rendered impossible by the history and thought and art of the twentieth century.'<sup>67</sup>

This failure to name place as in any way complete, final, or essential prompts the question, then, if or in what sense it is still possible to talk of a local pride in the case of Kroetsch's early long poems. As we have seen, the genealogical enquiry's lifting to expression of local particulars produces a palimpsest textual topos that leaves the literary prairie landscape disjointed, incomplete, gapped, unfixed, and without a traceable mile zero or first place. In terms of articulating a local pride – and the focus of this thesis – this is significant because it makes clear that 'the old

obsessive notion of identity and ego', the home place as a coerced regional or national unity of continuity, homogeneity, fixity, and traceable origins is indeed 'itself a spent fiction'.<sup>68</sup> To a significant extent, a Kroetschian local pride involves writing into existence by writing out of existence and accepting the notion of the Plains as a dispersed space of absences and displacements. Hence, the lifting to expression of local particulars articulates a sense of place that is low-key and operating with low-levels of self-definition. This is implied not only by the position of the other garden but also lines in later long poems, for example 'The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise' which states that 'the lost & the/ late home always/ found/ in the small flame' (CFN, 90). It might be suggested therefore that a local pride is both a strategy for erasing and resisting as well as survival and inhabitation.

It is of note, finally, that this sense of a local pride does not resolve the quest for and question of prairie space and place, except perhaps in the sense of irresolution as resolution. This paradox marks another significant point in the context of this thesis since it signals that Kroetsch's imagined history, or to use his own word myth, of the prairies is not linear, progressive, continuous, teleological or harbouring an illusion that place can be represented as coherent and transparent in a positivist way. Instead, irresolution serves as an indication that even in his earliest long poems Kroetsch was well under way towards formulating his dictum on the Plains as well as Canada as a space and a place that only achieves a sense of unity in disunity.<sup>69</sup> The central premise of this broader argument is that the Canadian writers I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter share an experience of failing to answer questions such as how to grow a garden, prairie town, and home place, that is, define a fixed sense of placial identity. But the fact that Kroetsch insists on the notions of irresolution as resolution and unity in disunity does indicate that Dianne Tiefensee is right in arguing that the predilection

for a concept of unity becomes a mark of the enduring influence of Western logocentrism on Kroetsch's writing even as its grammar of fragments seeks to move beyond essentialist identity debates.

If, in conclusion, we take a more general view of literary geographies of the Great Plains on both sides of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, the idea of low-volume self-definition in irresolution and disunity may perhaps be described as a Canadian rather than an American strategy. The way in which this becomes possible Kroetsch sets out in more detail in an essay titled 'Beyond Nationalism':

The escape from definition excites the Canadian beyond all reason. He is the American who is contrary to the American. He is the questing figure with the blurred photograph of what he must find gripped firmly in his hands, as in Klein's *The Second Scroll*. He is the agglomerate self of all those novels that hear the multiplicity of voices. He is the figure of Odysseus answering 'Nobody' to Polyphemus' life-and-death question.<sup>70</sup>

Whether one chooses to describe the textual topos of the early field notes as a grammar of fragments or a space of dispersion, it largely represents place as an unresolved effect of differences and differentiation in contrast to the progressive meta-narratives of Manifest Destiny and the frontier thesis. Not only do these overarching stories seek a coercive and repressive unity at regional and national level, they also feature prominently in literary as well as popular American and Canadian accounts of the Great Plains during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On this note, it seems pertinent therefore to return to the geographical centre of the United States to take a closer look at how an American, William Least Heat-Moon, addresses

the culturally dominant meta-narrative of progress in a contemporary text, the  
'geografictione', *PrairyErth: a deep map*.



#### 4. *PrairyErth*: re-troping the Plains place

William Least Heat-Moon's account of his six-year sojourn in Chase County, Kansas *PrairyErth (a deep map)* was published in 1991 to both popular and critical acclaim. Spending three months on *The New York Times* best-seller list, it successfully continued the literary mapping of America that Heat-Moon had begun in his first book-length travelogue *Blue Highways* (1984), a circumnational road trip along the North American backroads that the title makes reference to. On his motivation for writing *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon writes in *PrairyErth* that '[t]hree years later, trying to step out of the knee-deep shambles of what was passing for my life, I took off on such a trip [driving blue highways] with the hope that following new, physical maps could change the dream cartography a mind wanders in;' (PE, 223). The centripetal movement into a limited locale in *PrairyErth* not only changes the direction of the classic American road-trip travel narrative, it also marks a more intense exploration of the significance and possibilities of a dream cartography in mapping a local place on the ground and on the page.

Taking his cue from Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Heat-Moon begins his exploration of these different levels of travel by following almost literally in his nineteenth century predecessor's footsteps:

While circumnational journeys are fine, I might have reached a similar destination by staying within a single American county, even one of seeming sparseness like this one. The new challenge, [...] was, to reword Thoreau a bit, to travel a good deal in Chase County, and the requisite to that was to go slowly, almost inch by inch, on foot. (223)

The change in means of transportation and direction of travel from backroads and car in *Blue Highways* to an immersed exploration of the contours and minutiae of a remote Plains landscape is significant. It signals an intention to connect to one place ‘in the deepest sense’ by unearthing, re-tropeing, and re-imagining its particulars, and, in doing so, address a series of ‘loomings’ that the author harbours for the future of not just Chase County but the Plains region (105).

As this brief introduction suggests, *Blue Highways* and *PrairyErth* firmly place Heat-Moon within an American tradition of literary travel writing in terms of route, destination, mode of travel, intention, plot, and style of writing. In a Plains context, he follows consciously and self-reflexively in the footsteps of famous as well as unknown travellers and inhabitants who have written about the region. The plethora of quotations that make up ‘The Commonplace Book’, which introduces each of the book’s fourteen chapters, not only situate *PrairyErth* within a historical discourse on the prairies but also provide an intertextual context for the topics that each chapter covers. Besides Thoreau, the unfinished archive that is ‘The Commonplace Book’ features extracts from writers as diverse as Washington Irving, Walt Whitman, Willa Cather, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez. The inclusion of the last two is particularly telling because they hint at the contemporary literary context that *PrairyErth* inscribes itself into. It makes a weighty contribution to a growing body of literary geo- and cartographies of the Plains region that also includes texts such as Kathleen Norris’ *Dakota: a spiritual geography* (1993), Linda Hasselstrom’s *Going over East* (2001), and Don Gayton’s *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* (1992). In her recent critical work on literary cartographies of the Plains region, Susan Naramore Maher argues that these texts constitute ‘a dynamic contemporary tradition of non-fiction writing focused on the environment and nature of the Plains’ while also ‘attempting to understand the

erasure of a rich natural and indigenous history and the subsequent effects of the Euro-American culture that replaced it.’<sup>1</sup>

The result of Heat-Moon’s centripetal and multi-layered travels in the case of *PrairyErth* is a hefty 622-page deep map, a text of texts spanning numerous genres, topics, voices, and perspectives.<sup>2</sup> It is a narrative of a seemingly marginal place that is personal and local but told with a critical eye on the cultural and natural forces that have shaped and continue to shape the Plains region. Even though *PrairyErth* may be classified as literary non-fiction, it makes use of many of the techniques that readers associate with literary fiction. Most notably it does so when drawing up characters, setting the scene, making intertextual references, crossing established genre boundaries, and self-reflexively meditating on or mocking its own literary method. The most important of these fictional markers in the context of the present chapter is the series of variations on and transformations of common mapping tropes that Heat-Moon undertakes in order to re-trope and re-imagine ‘this prairie place’. As he writes on the significance of the imagination to place-making at a personal and communal level, ‘[p]eople connect themselves to the land as their imaginations allow’ (84).

To begin to explicate Heat-Moon’s dream cartography, then, this chapter sets out to examine the key spatialising tropes that define the deep map of the book’s subtitle. A clue to what the tropes are is offered by three map icons that adorn the cover and frontispiece of Heat-Moon’s travelogue. The proto-calligraphic pictogram, topographic, and cartographic map in question not only draw the reader’s attention to the central significance of mapping in the history of the Great Plains, but also in representing the region’s history visually and textually. For this reason, the first part of this chapter looks at how Heat-Moon deploys the grid as trope, icon, and emblem to recount the story of an imperial landscape and to count the costs of embracing a

narrative of purportedly rational place-making. Rather than representing spatial recovery and progress, the grid and its visual counterparts, the landscape prospect and the Claude glass, become emblems of erasure, destruction, loss, and alienation.

The second part shows how Heat-Moon begins to counter erasure, voiding, and alienation through a series of variations on topographic and archaeological mapping tropes that point to different ways of conceiving, representing, inhabiting, and travelling in the prairie place. Each of these variations point first of all to an immersion in and close analysis of the ground – a Thoreauian going ‘slowly, almost inch by inch, on foot’ – as a prerequisite for the kind of expert local knowledge that will allow the geographical imagination to begin to re-trope the Plains place and its spatial history. By following the flows of the topography and exploring both the horizontal and vertical axis of the Chase County landscape, Heat-Moon not only unearths placial particulars but also translates them into literary figures. In turn, these movements on the ground and page become central to the travel writer’s deep mapping in a cartographic dreamtime as this is the realm where the seemingly random plethora of notes, stories, shards, and events that he unearths is connected and configured.

The third part sets out in detail how the deep map trope’s ‘infinite lines’ that radiate ‘in an indefinite number of directions’ not only give form to a boundless ‘deep landscape’ but also articulate a resistance to cartographic mapping and its accompanying modernist meta-narrative of recovery and progress (246). In presenting the history of the prairies as a deep, palimpsest, and unclosed present characterised by ‘transgressions and regressions’, the literary deep map states the case for a reversal of the dominant Euro-American progressive plot (158). Instead, its story of place and space reads as a reverse recovery narrative – non-linear, anti-progressive, and

sceptical of Western rationalism. It not only asks the reader to join the author in immersing himself in his local landscape, but also in a dreamtime cartography where time is imagined as spatial rather than linear and the Plains landscape as deep and boundless but not without form.

This then leads to a discussion of the hybrid of Native American and ecologist notions that informs the dreamtime cartography through which Heat-Moon re-tropes and re-values the Chase County landscape and by synecdoche that of the Plains region. Because the 'two-bit mystic' in the writer traces the origins of his deep map to a 'not quite' supernatural aboriginal dreamtime, this part argues that the deep map trope does push the historicist practice and narrative of topoanalysis towards myth (14, 441). However, the spiritual dimension of *PrairyErth*'s literary cartography does not first and foremost reflect an attempt at dehistoricising and essentialising the Plains landscape. Rather it is suggested that Heat-Moon appropriates an aboriginal spirituality strategically to counter a dominant plot whose rationalism finds its 'embodiment' in an abstract grid; an emblem of an erasing and alienating production of space that takes place on both a social and aesthetic level.

From an aesthetic point of view, Heat-Moon's dreamtime mapping gives symbolic form to an embodied, material, and historicist journey into a seemingly barren and marginal place. In doing so, its hybrid and eclectic aesthetics not only marks a change to the face of the literary Plains place but also inscribes it with an ethics of ecological sustainability. Like the writings of Henry Thoreau, Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, *PrairyErth* also advocates 'sustainable agriculture with nature as its model'; an ethics of the aesthetics which is summed up in the words of ecologist and writer Wes Jackson in the interview chapter 'To Consult the Genius of Place in All':

*'If we overcome our ecological illiteracy and see that answers are more cultural than technological, we can start thinking about how to take advantage of the mysteries of community and tribe and our Paleolithic longings'* (493, 504, italics in original). It is finally in this cultural context that we can see how the literary cartography of *PrairyErth* intervenes in an ongoing territorial dispute that is not merely literary or aesthetic but also political and ideological in scope.

### *Gridding Ground and Text*

Perhaps more than any other figure, the rectangular cartographic grid has become an iconic emblem of the Plains region and the production of space which has shaped it physically, visually and discursively since the conception and subsequent implementation of the National Survey in the late eighteenth century. Today anyone who flies across the Great Plains region on a clear day cannot fail to notice in the words of John Stilgoe,

checkerboard America. Like a great geometrical carpet, like a Mondrian painting, the United States west of the Appalachians is ordered in a vast grid. Nothing strikes an airborne European as more typically American than the great squares of farms reaching from horizon to horizon.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, anyone picking up a copy of *PrairyErth* cannot fail to notice the iconic grid imprinted on the hard cover and the cartographic map of Chase County, Kansas on the frontispiece. In either case the grid directs the reader's attention towards the significance of cartographic mapping on the ground and within the world of text he is about to enter.

In the same way that an airline passenger is likely to notice the way the grid imposes a spatial order onto the land beneath, he or she may also notice upon reading *PrairyErth* how the grid functions as a structural organising principle of the textual topos. Each of the book's twelve chapters is named after and covers a quadrangle of Chase County as they are found on a survey map. In keeping with the Township and Range System, each of these quadrangular chapters is made up of six sections or parts which appear in the same regular order beginning with 'From the Commonplace Book' and 'In the Quadrangle'. These are then followed by three stories from the quadrangle and a final chapter called 'On the town', which, as O. Alan Weltzien reminds us, functions as an ironic, rural gesture to its urban namesake in *The New Yorker*.<sup>4</sup> Framing this striated textual order are the two-part introductory chapter, 'Crossings', and the concluding, 'Circlings'.<sup>5</sup>

In accordance with the cartographic approach to textual structuring, the grid imprinted on the book's grainy cover is reproduced at the beginning of each of its parts or sections. In each instance a dot within one of its twelve quadrangles helps the reader find his bearings within Chase County. This conventional use of a map as an instrument of spatial orientation is also in evidence in the first paragraph of *PrairyErth*. Here, in an extended figurative variation on survey map reading, Heat-Moon helps the reader position the seemingly marginal lands of Chase County at the centre of the nation:

I am standing on Roniger Hill, and I am trying to see myself as if atop a giant map of the United States. If you draw two lines from the metropolitan corners of America, one from New York City southwest to

San Diego and another from Miami northwest to Seattle, the intersection would fall a few miles from my position. (10)

From a structural and figurative point of view, we can see how *PrairyErth* makes conventional use of the cartographic grid. The surface structure of the textual topos mirrors the geometrical ordering of the Plains landscape on the ground and on survey maps. The textual grid organises and orders *PrairyErth*'s 'topographic map of words' rationally along linear lines on a two-dimensional homogenous plane of white paper. In doing so, it reminds the reader that like few other landscapes the Great Plains bears directly on its face the imprint of a spatial conception envisioned by a ruling political class as part of a nation-building project on a continental scale. In addition to this structural use of the grid, the text also makes conventional use of the survey map as an instrument of spatial orientation. It allows the reader to navigate the literary landscape of Chase County and position it within the larger nation state to which its history is inextricably linked.

The above observations suggest that as icon and trope the grid is deployed in a conventional manner to order a textual space rationally and systematically. Indeed, in the opening chapter Heat-Moon considers the possibility that '[m]aybe a grid was the answer: arbitrary quadrangles that have nothing inherently to do with the land, little to do with history, and not much to do with my details' (15). As these lines indicate, the grid provides a possible solution to a structural and formal problem that Heat-Moon grapples with while travelling in and writing about Chase County: how to avoid that the plethora of field notes, details, and stories that he gathers do not add up to a 'reality of randomness' (14). In place-making terms, the author is concerned that his notes will add up to an unbounded placeless chaos rather than a bounded and placeful



‘fact or image...’, ‘a landscape with figures’ or, at least, ‘a topographic map of words’ (14-15, 10). This is important, as we shall see, since the form that the literary landscape takes is instrumental to the writer fulfilling his ambition of knowing and belonging to ‘this prairie place’ ‘in the deepest sense’ (105). Faced with the predicament of placelessness, the grid offers the author surface structure and form to the scattered and seemingly random details of his word map much in the way that it offered the Founding Fathers’ imagined nation a spatial foundation with which to turn a perceived wilderness into landscape.

However, if we take into account that Heat-Moon’s approach to exploring and writing about Chase County is informed by the anthropological praxis of ‘thick description’, the choice of the grid structure begins to seem less obvious. In the ‘Commonplace Book’ to the prologue ‘Crossings’ we are told that ‘the term “thick description” refers to a dense accumulation of ordinary information about a culture, as opposed to abstract or theoretical analysis. It means observing the details of life until they begin to cohere into an interpretation’ (8). This pointillist mode of representing not only stands in immediate contrast to the abstraction of grid and map as diagrammatic modes of representation. It is also central to Heat-Moon’s aesthetic ambition of re-tropeing Chase County as ‘a landscape with figures’ (15). As a literary method, thick description’s ‘dense accumulation of ordinary information about a culture’ serves as an early sign of the travel writer’s scepticism towards a grid that has ‘nothing inherently to do with the land, little to do with history, and not much to do with my details’ (15).

Another indication of this scepticism can be found in the table of contents where the last section of the twelfth and final chapter marks a significant break from the dominant grid structure. Here the regular ‘On the Town’ section has been replaced

by a renegade meta-chapter, 'Until Black Hole XTK Yields Its Light'. This chapter or section ruptures the text's otherwise totalising grid structure by 'slipping from quadrangle to quadrangle', being 'the kind of opening a Native American weaver leaves in a blanket for the spirit in the design to find release and travel on beyond', and having 'topiclessness as a topic' (597, 599 & 598). These meta-narrative comments, at once deconstructive and indigenous, signal to the reader that the formal grid structure can never be total and unitary and that cartographic mapping, and with it place writing, can never be final, exhaustive or achieve closure.

Despite these early signs of a critical stance towards the grid, its ordering of the textual topos nonetheless constitutes a useful structural and figurative starting point for armchair travel in the rural centre of the US. The vast majority of readers are likely to be familiar with the grid as an emblem of the Midwest and with survey map reading. Whereas the latter may help them place a peripheral and marginal place within a national geography, both, as has already been suggested, refer to particular ways of understanding, representing and navigating in space and place. Read in this way, the grid as icon and structuring paradigm provides a textual face that mirrors that of the landscape on the ground, but which also, in the context of *PrairyErth*, allows the travel writer to interrogate it and gradually transform it through a series of variations on mapping tropes.

*Shaping the Ground: the grid as an emblem of imagined and real geographies*

A telling sign of the writer's critical interrogation of the grid is the choice of the word 'arbitrary' to describe the relationship between its quadrangles and the land, history, and text that it has helped shape. Like Cather and Kroetsch before him, Heat-Moon recounts the story of how the continent's central grasslands were turned into an imperial-colonial settler region during the westward expansion of the United States.

But more so than was the case in *O Pioneers!* and *Field Notes*, cartographic mapping features here as a key emblem of this process of spatialisation which, as we saw in Cather's prairie novel, has commonly been presented as a transformation of an unbounded wilderness into a bounded and civilised landscape. Heat-Moon acknowledges this when he writes that '[a]fter all, since the National Survey of 1785, seventy percent of America lies under such a grid, a system of coordinates that has allowed wildness to be subdued' (15).

In his version of the story of progressive recovery, the coordinates of the survey map are indicative of how an abstract and visual representation of space became instrumental to the physical and symbolic shaping of the Great Plains as a purportedly rational national landscape. The representation in question is that of the cartographic map on which one finds 'the great American grid', which, according to the author, is 'an expression of eighteenth-century rationalism if ever there was one' (282). By conceiving of space as infinite, planiform, and homogenous, politicians and surveyors were able through a process of geometrical abstraction to represent the prairie topography and its inhabited places as a series of linear lines, quadrangles and points on a two-dimensional paper surface. As Edward Casey explains in his philosophical history of place and space, *The Fate of Place*, cartographic representation makes place calculable and transforms it into sites which 'themselves [are] evacuated of any significant content.'<sup>6</sup> It is in this sense of an abstraction and voiding of place into space in order to landscape that I believe one should read Heat-Moon's comment that survey map quadrangles are arbitrary in relation to the land they give form to.

The grid then is not just a representational construct. It is also instrumental to the physical shaping of the Plains landscape. We see this most clearly in the case of

the appropriately named Homestead quadrangle where ‘inked lines’ have been ‘turned to cut-in roads’ as part of a process of geometrical place-making (364). The result of inscribing the map’s abstract projection onto the ground is laid out before the reader in the opening paragraph of ‘In the Quadrangle: Homestead’. In this corner of Chase County, we find the map’s

section lines marked so clearly by square fields and roads cut into the high and flattish topography that they show up in satellite photographs. To drive the gridded acres here [...] is always to be aligned perfectly with true north or precisely ninety degrees off it; that there are only four compass headings on the Homestead roads is an emblem of this area of wheat and milo and some overgrazed pastures. (363)

In addition to describing how a representation of space has been turned into a physical and social place, this extract also illustrates the symbolic power of the grid. Alongside tropes comparing the work of the survey map to a squaring ‘into Jeffersonian perfection’ and a ‘perfect scotching of the prairie’, it demonstrates how metaphors contribute actively to cultural place-making by furnishing spatial discourses with figures that help people conceive and perceive of the land before them (364). It is with recourse to this notion of landscaping as something that takes place not just on the ground, but also in language and in the mind that Heat-Moon claims that more than most other landscapes the Plains represent a case of ‘the imaginary become real’ (364).<sup>7</sup>

The imaginary that Heat-Moon is referring to is the Founding Fathers’ vision of ‘a Classical political landscape, one based on the notion that certain spaces –

*notably the square and the rectangle – were inherently beautiful and therefore suited to the creation of a just society*’ (261, italics in original).<sup>8</sup> As the author explains, Thomas Jefferson did not only conceive of ‘the township-and-range system – the great American grid’ as a rational spatial foundation for an aesthetically pleasing and morally just nation (282). He also came up with the idea of planting Osage Orange trees and hedges along the quadrangles of the grid in order to establish and enforce ‘agricultural and political dominion [...] on the face of America west of the Appalachians’ (282). In other words, to realise the utopian vision of an at once rational and democratic landscape populated by yeoman homesteaders, Osage Orange was to serve as ‘a living embodiment of the gridwork of the new civilization; it would be what a constitution is to a government, what a police patrol is to a neighborhood: a thing defining, delimiting, enforcing’ (282).

In geo-political and territorial terms, the Plains may be viewed as a key component of a domestic imperial-colonial landscape. The Classical and Enlightenment spatial structure that defines the region spreads outwardly from the nation’s centre of political power, that is, the grids and squares of Washington and Philadelphia and extends westward across the continent. Because it does so, we can see with Denis Cosgrove how, ‘[t]he ideas of perspective and [a] rational ordering of space stand at the origins of America, in the maps of Toscanelli, and at the pivot of its republican ideals, in the rectangular grid of the rural landscape and the blocks and axes of Washington.’<sup>9</sup> In turn, this story of the United States’ imperial territorialisation of North America’s grasslands is part of a larger national narrative of ‘progressive civilisation’ (83). In it reason in the form of science, technology, and capitalism are instrumental to the transformation of inchoate wilderness into a rational and civilised agrarian landscape. According to Carolyn Merchant,

the story of Western civilisation since the seventeenth century and its advent on the American continent can be conceptualised as a grand narrative of fall and recovery. The concept of recovery, as it emerged in the seventeenth century, not only meant a recovery from the Fall but also entailed restoration of health, reclamation of land, and recovery of property [...] Three subplots organize its argument: Christian religion, modern science, and capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to being an emblem of idealistic and ideological place-making at the level of grand narrative, the cartographic grid in Heat-Moon's account of Euro-American settlement is also exemplary of how, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, a 'dominant form of space, that of the centres of wealth and power, endeavours to mould the spaces it dominates (i.e. peripheral spaces), and it seeks, often by violent means, to reduce the obstacles and resistance it encounters there.'<sup>11</sup>

Understood in a Lefebvrian sense as an instrument of spatial production, the survey quadrangles reduce, erase, and ignore topographic obstacles and placial particulars. The remnants of Osage orange hedgerows, for example, serve as a reminder of the striation of the smooth spaces of a vernacular Plains landscape by a dominant power putting modern science in the form of cartographic surveying to practical as well as ideological use.<sup>12</sup> Even today, the author notes, the effects of making the invisible grid visible in an attempt to make the imaginary real are still felt:

[A]s curbstones are to a suburb, so was Osage hedge to the prairies, as it came to mark out routes and channel citizens onto them, laying down a

pattern that so shaped lives that people began to build their new houses in alignment with the now visible grid. They set out their furniture accordingly, dressers and bedsteads against walls running only in cardinal compass directions, so that, still today, Chase County sleeps north-south or east-west, the square rooms squared with the world, the decumbent folk like an accountant's figures neatly between ruled lines, their slumber nicely compartmentalized in Tom's grand grid. (287)

Like Foucault's capillary discourse, the gridding of the Plains did not just delimit and enforce a spatial order on the ground, it also affected – and continues to do so – people's behaviour and how they inhabit the place. The extract demonstrates how this happens by detailing how the rectilinear conduits of the territorialising grid channel the de-territorialising flows of a common vernacular landscape. Before the imposition of straight section lines, the author explains, homesteaders had 'made their own roads to town, to church, to the neighbours, and tracks lay haphazardly over the place, each family needing its own crossing over a creek, its own grade over a hill, and everyone moving in frequent trespass' (286-87). As the comparison of people to 'an accountant's figures' and their sleep as metaphorically 'compartmentalized in Tom's grand grid' suggest, the homogenous and uniform space of the grid effectively erases through abstraction the 'qualitative multiplicities' that not only add character and value to inhabited places but also, from a representational point of view, 'resist exact centration or reproduction, and all the more so universalization.'<sup>13</sup> That is to say, the dominant form of place-making that the grid represents has, according to Heat-Moon, contributed to the alienation of the Plains inhabitants from their habitat because it

striates and abstracts qualitative multiplicities and hence the prairie beneath the grid remains unfamiliar to them in significant ways.

*The Economics of the Grid: the cost of empire*

In addition to being instrumental to the geo-political territorialisation of the Kansan plains, quadrangles and Osage orange hedgerows also played an important role in establishing an economic order. They did so primarily by providing ‘*an easy and effective way of dividing up the land*’ into parcels of private property that could be sold or auctioned off as well as used for growing agricultural produce to be sold on the open market (261, italics in original).<sup>14</sup> The settlers may have ‘believed that a good fence was...an earmark’ or ‘precursor’ of civilisation, but they were also acutely aware that ‘the correlation between fences and profits was direct: you harvested only what you could protect’ (280, 281). The grid was not, then, simply an emblem of an idealistic project of national place-making. It was also and continues to be a pragmatic instrument that enables the turning of land into a commodity that can be bought and sold according to the logic of a capitalist marketplace. In the case of Western America, the logic of the market dictated a ‘pursuit of property and profit’, which, according to Patricia Limerick, was commonly described as ‘rationality in action, and not emotion at all.’ But contrary to popular belief, ‘the passion of profit was and is a passion like most others. It can make other concerns insignificant and inspire at once extraordinary courage and extraordinary cruelty. It was the passion at the core of the Western adventure.’<sup>15</sup>

Throughout *PrairyErth* several episodes, events, and stories involving early settlers, absentee landowners, and oil drillers attest to the effect that the passion of profit has had on the shape of both the real and the imagined prairie landscape. In ‘Via



the Short Line to China' Heat-Moon tells the story of eccentric spiritualist and railroad pioneer, Arthur Stilwell, who lost control of the Kansas City Southern railroad to "'Bet-a-Million" Gates, a man of easy ethics' (247). Despite this setback, Stilwell nonetheless went on to conceive of and begin constructing a railroad linking the markets of the Midwest to those of the Far East. This time, however, he not only had to endure the failure of his as yet incomplete railroad but also to watch company shares being bought cheaply by Kansas banker and speculator, William Kemper. Tellingly, Kemper subsequently went on to make 'several million dollars' by selling the railroad to the Santa Fe (251). All three men, and their shareholders, were in the words of Heat-Moon 'possessed of the old European lust for the riches of the Indies, that avarice at the heart of the stealing and corrupting of the American land' (252). According to the author and his travel companion, the Venerable Tashmoo, this passion of profit and lust for instant riches has significantly influenced the way Euro-Americans have imagined, acted on, and tried to mould the prairie in their image ever since Coronado first arrived in search of mythic 'rooms full of gold in Quivira'.<sup>16</sup> In their final analysis, Heat-Moon and the Venerable argue in a religiously coloured rhetoric that the passion of profit – often in the guise of rational or Christian doctrine – is a cardinal sin. Together with pride, it has lead to and legitimised exploitation by the extractive mining economies of a dominant Euro-American culture to a point where the region's biome and cultural landscape are now threatened with extinction. Towards the end of their travels, the Venerable pointedly sums up this analysis when he tells the author and his readers that '*[e]xploitation is the fruit of pride and greed, and its consequence is extinction*' (italics in original, 619).

As the last two paragraphs make clear, a central strand in Heat-Moon's critical interrogation of the grid is the recounting of the costs of embracing it as both an

emblem and instrument of purportedly rational and progressive place-making. Of the costs to the Chase County landscape of the story of 'progressive civilisation' two in particular stand out (337). From an ethnic point of view, the transformation of the prairie wilderness into property and farm land resulted in the removal and displacement of 'the inhabitants of the last ten thousand years', the nomadic Kansa and Osage tribes (56). Heat-Moon devotes the majority of the twelfth and final quadrangle to tracing and documenting how 'Anglo society' managed to evict these tribal cultures 'in only ten years by odious methods governments and churches condoned, by an ethic that taints every Pioneer Mother statue put up by the Daughters of the American Revolution' (56). Moreover, removing the Kansa and Osage tribes also meant that aboriginal knowledge of the land, its 'operating instructions', was lost (239). This loss would prove to be crucial, according to Heat-Moon, because it contributed to the settler culture's continuing failure to understand and come to terms with a landscape that it perceived as strange and alienating. In a further paradoxical twist, it is suggested that their failure to see the land before them made it easier for the Euro-American settlers 'to remake it into the East' physically, and, as we shall see, symbolically (56).

From a historical perspective, the displacement of the Kansa to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma also corroborated the notion of Native Americans as vanishing and helped pave the way for collective forgetfulness. As a consequence, present-day inhabitants of Chase County are not aware of how their homesteading ancestors 'came to gain title to the land' (559). Moreover, it is such contemporary 'innocence born of ignorance' that enables Chase Countians to 'hustle falsified history to tourists' by reducing Native American culture and artefacts to commodified stereotypes (337, 559). As anthropologist Joe Hickey explains, '[p]eople want Indian

commodities, not their way of seeing the world. Turquoise rings, not significant concepts' (553). From the point of view of the Kansa and Osage tribes, the progressive meta-narrative has been, in the words of Heat-Moon, a story of cultural removal, loss, and reduction to the point where they now appear only as ghastly absent presences, i.e. tourist attractions, or ghostly present absences as in Joe Hickey's dream: '*I was dreaming I was sleeping and that I suddenly woke up and saw three human silhouettes against the sheer curtain of the big window in our bedroom...Looking in at me were three Kaws in dirty, ragged blankets. Nothing but bags of bones. Then I woke up...*' (560, italics in original).

Closely related to the removal of pre-settlement tribal cultures to make room for an emerging Euro-American agrarian culture is a story of ecological and environmental loss, which in a contemporary Plains context is threatening to lead to cultural loss also. The 'scientific' farming techniques first introduced by white settlers in the middle to late nineteenth century and later developed and intensified by twentieth century agri-industry have led to soil depletion and a loss of biome diversity on a scale that now threatens the sustainability of the white settler culture. During the interview chapter 'To Consult the Genius of Place in All' geneticist and environmental writer Wes Jackson tells the author that '*agribusiness works by homogenising landscapes*' and '*is incredibly simple and simplifying but its high energy destroys biological and cultural information and patterns*' (501). Heat-Moon witnesses this destruction of biome first hand when he walks the rangeland of the Matfield Green quadrangles. Here he

find[s] a county cut by cattle trails: *Amorpha* indicates healthy prairie, and its absence reveals severe disturbance to the original vegetation, and this

loss is significant since its deep leguminous roots fix nitrogen in soil.

Nothing so demonstrates that this is land under the domination of white men as springtime hills absent the purple flowers of lead plant. (243)

The loss of biological diversity and with it knowledge of the local ecology is directly linked to the workings of a capitalist economic system which, according to Wes Jackson, *'arose and expanded to its highest level on a young and abundant North American continent. But capitalism is a pump, an extractive system that bases its strength on eventual exhaustion'* (498). Elsewhere feminist and environmentalist rancher Jane Beedle Koger spells out the consequences of not just overgrazing in an attempt to raise profit margins but of modern agribusiness more generally: 'If anyone anywhere should be environmentalists, all of us here should: if we lose the land's productivity, we've lost our hope of living here' (193). Thus informed by the thinking of environmentalists like Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez, Heat-Moon ends his sustained critique of the extractive economies of agribusiness and mining industries by concluding that they lead to eventual 'exhaustion' and 'extinction' (619). Elsewhere, he rephrases this conclusion in a less analytical and more apocalyptic manner by declaring that the white man's 'way of life is the land's death and his way of death is the land's life' (243).

As I have tried to show in this part, Heat-Moon deploys and critically interrogates the grid as the central spatialising emblem of a progressive meta-narrative of placial recovery. In recounting this modern narrative, he links the grid inextricably to subplots of science, capitalism, and religion. Most notably, he does so when he traces their physical, cultural, and discursive impact on the Chase County landscape from the conception of the American grid in the Enlightenment through to its

implementation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and into a period of late modernity towards the end of the twentieth century. From his vantage point atop Jacob's Mound in the 1980s, the author describes how he 'could see fence lines, transmission towers, and dug ponds, things the pioneers would have viewed as marks of a progressive civilization but which to me, a grouching neo-primitivist, were signs of the continuing onslaught' (83). These lines straightforwardly articulate Heat-Moon's opposition to 'the story of Western civilisation' by recapitulating it as a history of erasure, destruction, and loss. Instead of attaching the Plains inhabitants to their habitat, its dominant place-making practices have prevented them from acquiring the type of knowledge that only direct and continuing acquaintance with the past and present landscape, topography, and biome – the title, *PrairyErth*, is 'scientific shorthand' for 'the soils of our central grasslands' – can offer (3). As a consequence, the ground and place has remained unfamiliar and alien to them. To Heat-Moon, therefore, the overarching spatial narrative of recovery is not one of ethnic, environmental, or cultural progress. Rather in the case of Chase County, and by synecdoche the Plains region, it is a story of regression and declension.

*Erasure, Voiding, Alienation I: towards a literary discourse of the grid*

The previous section focused primarily on the grid as an emblem and instrument of rational place-making which, as part of a dominant overarching narrative, has had significant territorial, environmental, and cultural ramifications for the Chase County landscape. In explicating this strand of *PrairyErth*, I at times alluded to the way the cartographic grid has functioned as a trope that has contributed to a discourse that talks of the Plains as alien, void, and barren. As Annette Kolodny and Graham Huggan have both noted, this is indicative of how the shaping of the early American landscape depended not just on the ability to transform the land physically but also

‘on the viability of emergent cultural myths [...] disseminated through a range of metaphors for transforming wilderness.’<sup>17</sup> Hence, before I assess *PrairyErth*’s re-tropeing and –mapping of the Plains place in its intra- as well as extra-textual context, it is necessary first to set out in more detail how not only the grid but also landscape prospects and a Claude glass contribute to this discursive erasure and voiding and what the consequences are for the literary Plains place. After all, the text’s surface grid structure does remind us that *PrairyErth* is a literary text and artefact in the first place.

In addition to featuring recurrently as textual tropes, the cartographic grid and landscape prospects are also visual modes of representing and understanding space and place. In the case of the former, the inclusion of a frontispiece survey map makes this apparent whereas in the case of the latter, it is best seen in a prospect of ‘Cottonwood Falls, Kansas’ drawn by D. D. Morse in 1878 and an experiment with a Claude glass in the chapter ‘In the Quadrangle: Hymer’ (Fig. 4 & 5). As I have already mentioned, the survey map’s underlying notion of space as infinitely extensive, planiform, and homogenous allows it not only to abstract place and represent it diagrammatically, but also to perceive place from a detached and all-seeing God’s-eye-view that creates in the observer the illusion of being in control of both space and place. By thus abstracting place towards space, grid and survey map obscure significant features of the land and landscape beneath its gaze. Figuratively, the grid becomes ‘a net to ensnare the land and haul dark mysteries like a load of pilchards into the light [...] In my time in the quad, I could never find a way to escape through the gaps into where the real place might lie...’ (364). One of the ironies of the Enlightenment grid then is that it does not so much illuminate and enlighten as conceal and obscure; gridding signifies a production of absences which in the context

of Heat-Moon's recounting of Chase County's spatial history 'imprisoned the place and fenced me out' (364).

A quotation from Peter Steinhart's *Names on a Map* in 'From the Commonplace Book: Homestead' further explicates the narrative consequences of this erasure of topography and inhabited landscape for the literary cartographer trying to conjure up a 'landscape with figures' tropically and visually. According to Steinhart, and with him Heat-Moon, cartographic maps are

*drawn by computers from satellite photos, and that suggests that the Earth has lost its capacity to keep secrets. The natural features are buried under the gridwork of roads and the blur of names. Maps become a means of getting past things, of threading the ganglia and writ of modern life. We tend to look at them for what we want to avoid, rather than what, in good fortune, we might discover. (354, italics in original)*

From the aesthetic and imaginative perspective of the literary cartographer, the trope of the grid is problematic because it buries and obscures the natural and cultural 'ganglia' of landscape. As a consequence, it fails narratively to make the reader wonder at landscape's 'capacity to keep secrets' and the traveller's ability to discover place serendipitously. By encoding placial information in lines, curves, circles and legends, 'maps provide examples of plotless texts characterized by their definite order of internal organization' in contrast to 'plotted texts' which, according to Yuri Lotman, 'cross the forbidden border which the plotless structure establishes.'<sup>18</sup> Like Lotman, Heat-Moon also stresses the formalism of cartographic mapping, that is, the way the lived world is reduced and abstracted to formal elements in order to be read

as ordered, organised and under control. To the extent that Heat-Moon is unable to cross the forbidden border of the grid, he discovers in the words of Steinhart that there is ‘*not much fable in a landscape we cannot enter*’ (354). Understood figuratively, then, the surface grid structure of *PrairyErth* signifies a kind of narrative poverty of cartographic mapping, its linear lines providing only a plotless structure that lacks the potential to unearth and structure the fragments and palimpsest layers of a geography that may help its writers and readers ‘know a place in [a] real and lasting way’, ‘value’ it, and, ultimately, ‘belong to it in the deepest sense’ (105, 336). Thus, in addition to being an emblem of a spatial history of loss and alienation, the trope of the grid is also emblematic of spatial and placial erasure, reduction, and poverty from a narrative and aesthetic point of view.

In a literary as well as extra-literary context, the type of emptying that the trope of the grid represents in *PrairyErth* has helped void the region’s topography and inhabited landscape pre- as well as post-settlement. Its abstract visual and semiotic mode of representation has contributed to a writing out of existence of the prairie and to a discursive construction of it as a tabula rasa, a virgin land, and an open space that was – and continues to be – available for territorialisation. This aspect of imperial-colonial place-making we find not just in settlers intent on turning wilderness into agrarian landscape or in a young nation-state wanting to legitimise and make real a spatial imaginary. It is also present in the geographical imagination of creative writers telling the story of regional place-making in fiction as well as literary non-fiction. ‘After all,’ Heat-Moon reminds us, ‘no place on a map carries more mystery than its blankness, the *terrae incognitae* old cartographers inscribed with “Here Be Strange Beasts”’ (365).



It seems entirely appropriate in the context of this dissertation, then, that Heat-Moon should choose to illustrate the literary voiding of the Plains with, firstly, a quotation from one of Willa Cather's novels: 'Of the prairie, Willa Cather wrote in *My Ántonia: Between the earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out*', and, secondly, a few lines from Mary Austin's *The Flock*: 'There is a look about men who come from sojourning in that country, as if the sheer nakedness of the land had somehow driven the soul back upon its elemental impulses' (12, 603, italics in original). As Henri Lefebvre rightly points out, this cultural and aesthetic notion of space as an empty and naked blank is itself another representation of space, a conceived and imagined space:

The notion of a space which is at first empty, but is later filled by a social life and modified by it, also depends on this hypothetical initial 'purity', identified as 'nature' and as a sort of ground zero of human reality. Empty space in the sense of a mental and social void which facilitates the socialization of a not-yet-social realm is actually merely a *representation of space*.<sup>19</sup>

However, as we have seen in previous chapters, this representation of space is itself productive in terms of literary geographies. The 'mystery blankness' of map and Plains space alike performs an emptying that aids the construction of a discursive ground zero on which mythic and mystifying narratives can be grounded. As I demonstrated in the chapter on *O Pioneers!*, this dominant spatial narrative which represents place-making as a liberating creation out of nothing has come at significant costs; costs which we saw Robert Kroetsch begin to unhide and record in his prairie

field notes in an attempt to violate and demystify dominant literary tropes and narratives of the Great Plains such as landscape and garden.

Following on from Kroetsch, it is also in order to subvert this dominant narrative of the Plains place that Heat-Moon re-appropriates the trope of spatial blankness in an imaginative attempt to erase that which erases, imprisons, and alienates, i.e., the grid. He feels compelled 'to go back into Homestead at night and noctinavigate the encroached quad, let darkness conceal the intruded place, let my dimmed vision turn graphpaper land into a blank sheet...' (365). Heat-Moon effectively reproduces the *terra nullius*, void, and *tabula rasa* that is characteristic of the discourse of survey map and grid to clear space for a re-mapping and re-tropeing of the Plains place in his text. Whereas the *tabula rasa* has been deployed historically to legitimise colonisation in the form of inscription, tilling, and fencing, Heat-Moon re-appropriates it figuratively as a blank sheet [of paper] to undo the grid's rational abstraction and reduction, to unearth the absences it produces, what its representation or imaginary erases, obscures, and forgets whether it be native tallgrasses, nuclear silos or Kaw Indians. Tellingly, this imaginative exercise in noctinavigation leads only to absurdity, but as the author wryly notes 'that too is a destination' (370). Despite the author's apparent failure, the incident turns out to be an important lesson in mapping because absurdism points him in the direction of his valued place-making realm, the imagination and dreamtime. We are told that it was during his nocturnal wandering that he 'truly began to wonder whether [he] hadn't hallucinated' (370). In the last part of this chapter we shall see how hallucinating and dreamtime mapping address the poverty of the grid and cartographical mapping both literally and figuratively, how '[l]ooking for the ludicrous allows our dreams – and sometimes dreams of others to lead us' (223).

This leaves just one discursive aspect of the visual formants' emptying and alienating way of seeing to be accounted for. Historically, cartographic maps have helped Euro-Americans – in particular those viewing the region from the outside – see the Plains as 'that place you have to get through, that purgatory of mileage' (82). Heat-Moon traces the formation of this popular perception back to nineteenth century settlers who when crossing the prairie 'almost never opened to perception' because they were expecting bounded landscape but in finding only unbounded prairie recorded in their diaries 'numbed miles over grass, grass, grass' (199). More recently, the turning of the coordinates of the survey map into straight roads and fly paths have enabled travellers going by car to be 'fired down the long, smoking bore of the turnpike that shoots across' the plains (17). This mode of fast and enclosed movement modelled on the geometric plane of the map not only separates the contemporary traveller from the landscape physically, it also reinforces the visual perception and popular experience of the prairie as 'barren, desolate, monotonous, a land of more nothing than almost any other place you might name' (10).

*Erasure, Voiding, Alienation II: landscape prospect and Claude glass*

From a representational point of view, landscape prospect and Claude glass complement grid and survey map in significant ways in the process of Euro-American place-making on the prairies. The realist landscape genre epitomises a visual mode of representation which shapes the prairie in the image of an aesthetic tradition dating back to Renaissance Europe. In doing so, it, like the grid, erases, obscures and imprisons significant features of the place beneath its gaze. Conceptually, the landscape prospect shares with the survey map an underlying notion that space possesses universal properties such as infinite extension, planiformity, and homogeneity and that these are governed by the laws of Euclidean geometry. In terms

of painterly practice and composition, these properties and laws translate into central perspective. From a vantage point the artist sees and arranges the ‘orts’ and ‘ganglia’ of a particular place along the lines of central perspective’s visual triangle as these move through fore-, middle, and background towards a vanishing point. Central perspective thus enables the viewer to experience the realist illusion of three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional surface – or space – of canvas. Rather than abstracting and reducing place diagrammatically to lines, curves and symbols, the traditional realist landscape painting appears to offer a mimetic and transparent representation of place.

In the case of *PrairyErth*, the most obvious example of this type of culturally constructed landscape is a reproduction of a drawing of Cottonwood Falls, Kansas by D. D. Morse (Fig. 5). Heat-Moon refers to the prospect as ‘an 1878 bird’s-eye-view engraving’ (56). Like thousands of similar prints, it takes as its vantage point an imaginary hill from which the viewer overlooks a young town whose streets have been ordered along the rectilinear lines of a grid laid over the undulating prairie topography.<sup>20</sup> In acts of symbolic place-making and –naming, the streets of the treeless plains have not only been lined with and named after trees such as hazel, cherry, and pine but also political entities such as ‘State’ and ‘Union’. In the same way that painting trees along the streets and round the houses of the townscape suggests the transformation of an alien sea of grass into familiar enclosed woodland, so ‘State’ and ‘Union’ allude to Cottonwood Falls as an integral part of a grand political landscape. That is to say, the salient realist elements of the painterly prospect – the grid, streets numbered or named after woodland trees, a ‘Second Empire-style courthouse’, and several churches – retell a story of progressive civilisation and embody the beliefs, values, and ideology of an imperial-colonial landscape narrative

(49). We can see therefore that prospect, is, not only a ‘word whose roots in English are the same as those of “perspective”, [it] also carries the sense of time, the future.’<sup>21</sup> Its underlying notion of linear spatial progress is accompanied by a strong temporocentrism in contrast to the conflated American Indian notion of time which, as we shall see, informs Heat-Moon’s deep map.

In the context of this dissertation, viewing the 1878 drawing of Cottonwood Falls as an iconic and contemporary counterpart to the Hanover townscape and agrarian landscapes that Willa Cather depicts in *O Pioneers!* yields some interesting insights. Through the Cottonwood scene, Heat-Moon recounts the story of ‘progressive civilization’, but unlike Cather he makes the point that the landscape prospect, like the cartographic map, produces significant absences (83). The author explains how this happens when he comments on the type of place-making that the painting represents: ‘Rather than learning what the prairie could provide and then changing their ways to harmonize with the land new to them, the settlers began trying to remake it into the East’ (56). As the drawing shows, they ‘planted trees to remove it [prairie]’ (56). Hence the Cottonwood Falls prospect reminds us that this remaking did not only take place on the ground but also in paintings and literary texts informed and inspired by the techniques and common tropes of a Euro-American landscape tradition. As Heat-Moon notes, it is by imposing those onto the prairies that they write and depict its inhabited landscape and topography out of existence, and, in so doing, contribute to the imprisonment of the place and its alienation from viewer, traveller, and inhabitant alike.

The problems that Heat-Moon identifies with imaginative and aesthetic place-making in the iconic and tropical mode of landscape prospect are succinctly summarized in a passage in which he once again tries to enter the prairies beneath the

grid. This time he does so through a Claude glass, which is perhaps as significant an emblem of eighteenth and nineteenth century visual place-making conventions and tastes as the grid is of the period's geo-political equivalent. Despite his initial optimism that the 'mirror could rearrange things and show me, so memory-ridden, what I was having trouble seeing', the Claude glass, like the painterly prospect and the cartographic grid, offers only 'a two-dimensional landscape I could see but not enter: the prospect was both real and impossible, it was there and it wasn't, and I entered it by walking away from it. If I turned to look, it was gone...' (268-69). Paradoxically, then, entering the land visually through the Claude glass means distancing oneself from it and reducing and alienating one's experience and representation of place in ways not dissimilar to those of landscape prospect and grid.

At this point the critical reader may wonder with Henri Lefebvre, '[w]hat possible justification could there be for conflating an empty Euclidean geometric space that is unaffected by whatever may fill it and a visual space [landscape prospect and Claude glass] with well-defined optical properties – ...?' According to Lefebvre, the answer to his own rhetorical question is that

[t]he thesis of an inert spatial medium where people and things, actions and situations, merely take up their abode, as it were, corresponds to the Cartesian model (conceiving of things in their extension as the 'object' of thought) which over time became the stuff of 'common sense' and 'culture'. A picture of mental space developed by the philosophers and epistemologists thus became a transparent zone, a logical medium.<sup>22</sup>

As *PrairyErth*'s history of Chase County and, by synecdoche, the Plains region demonstrates, grid, landscape prospect, and Claude glass have become 'the stuff of 'common sense' and 'culture', and as such have influenced literary and painterly geographies of the Great Plains to a significant extent. In passages on all three, Heat-Moon repeatedly problematises their role as visual formants in representing the Plains landscape, noting how as icons and tropes they have made a significant contribution to the figurative construction of the region. Notably, they have helped an imaginary – the United States as a rational, agrarian landscape – become real in a discursive and mythical sense, thus reminding us in Annette Kolodny's words that it is not enough to master the land physically, it must also be mastered mentally and metaphorically. However, in so far as this discursive use of map and landscape has become culturally prominent, it has not only influenced the way people see, understand, and live on the prairies. It has also erased, hidden, and alienated salient elements of the place from us. Understood in this way, then, spatialising tropes and icons are productive beyond the realms of the mental, imaginative, and symbolic. Their influence is felt and should be discussed as part of a wider social and cultural production of space and place.

*Topography: tracing and troping the place beneath the grid*

Facing the survey map on the frontispiece of *PrairyErth* is a topographic map depicting the 'Major Watersheds of Chase County' (Fig. 6). In immediate contrast to the rectilinear lines of the quadrangles on the map opposite, its branches are jagged, bending, and flowing. In depicting these non-linear aspects, the topographic map icon offers a clue to the formal features that characterise the tropes describing the topography of Chase County throughout Heat-Moon's travels. Whereas in the Homestead quadrangle the writer found himself travelling in a straight line along the four cardinal points of the compass, he discovers in Elmdale how 'a watercourse cuts

the quad', and 'so twists upon itself that it flows toward every point of the compass' (315). Similarly, the Osage orange tree takes on new figurative and narrative significance when studied up close. Instead of alluding to place-making on a grand scale, it 'like my jaunts, usually takes a digressive course in sending its branches out: they twist, turn, bend, bow, warp, hook, crook, curve, deflect, and arc' (280). In addition to waterways and trees, the roots in the prairie soil likewise display a rhizomatic flow. In one of the book's prominent dreamscape sequences we are told that one 'can look into the soil [...] see roots in their descent, their webbed complexity' (237).

The poly-directional and non-linear movements of topographic features such as waterways, branches, and roots are of central figurative, structural and narrative importance to *PrairyErth*'s re-mapping and re-tropeing of the Chase County landscape. In conjunction with the trope of the archaeological grid, which turns 'the grid into a screen that might sift out artifacts', they represent an effort to unearth what lies beneath the quadrangles and a grassland topography that the author describes as 'a vastly exposed place of concealment' (364, 28). At ground level, this involves a process of topoanalysis in which the pedestrianised travel writer immerses himself in the local landscape while 'digging, sifting, sorting, [and] assembling shards' (16). On the page these become the 'pointillist spots of ink' and word 'daubs' that constitute the figurative raw material for a process of imaginative place-making. In turn, the 'topography of words' that this process secretes not only reveals what the striating and alienating grid conceals, it also begins to give a different figurative face to the literary Plains place (335, 336).

Central to this imaging and imagining of the prairies is a fusing together of the horizontal windings of the topographic map and the verticality of the archaeologist's



grid. As we shall see, it is this creative fusion of mapping tropes that provides the conceptual and formal underpinnings for the text's central spatial metaphor, the multi-dimensional and semantically polysemous deep map. In saying so, I do not mean to suggest that the deep map of *PrairyErth* is merely a formal or creative exercise that values aesthetic place-making above all other kinds. Rather the suggestion is that it sees literary mapping as inextricably linked to a sustained and intense bodily and sensory emplacement in and engagement with place characteristic of topoanalysis. The latter is, in other words, a necessary step towards the acquisition of lasting and intimate knowledge of a particular place. In turn, this knowledge is requisite to the telling of a palimpsest history of Chase County that both reveals and attempts to counter the kind of cultural and environmental erasure, loss, and alienation that Heat-Moon associates with the grid and the region's dominant spatial narrative.

### *The Practice of Topoanalysis*

On a denotative level, the topographic map on the frontispiece depicts the major waterways of Chase County. In doing so, it makes direct reference to the land beneath the grid and alludes to the importance of what we might call topoanalysis in unearthing the particulars of an apparent 'place of concealment' (28). Topoanalysis is a term that I have borrowed from the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard in whose *The Poetics of Space* it entails 'the systematic psychological study of the localities of our intimate lives.'<sup>23</sup> Such close analysis of the intimate immensity of a psycho-geography also applies to *PrairyErth* to the extent that 'the dream cartography a mind wanders in' enables people to attach themselves to and cherish place in a manner not dissimilar to Bachelard's notion of a 'felicitous space' (223).<sup>24</sup> However, leaving aside the workings of Heat-Moon's dream cartography for now, topoanalysis on and of the ground involves bodily immersion in and movement across the Chase

County landscape in contrast to the detached view from nowhere of the cartographic map and the bird's-eye-view of the landscape prospect.

The first step of topoanalysis is 'to travel [...] by leg' and 'walking over Chase County, Kansas, grid by topographic grid' in the manner of Thoreau (15, 18). To do so, the travel writer must first 'go down off this ridge [Roniger Hill]' and thus symbolically abandon not only his but also the vantage point of the prospect of Cottonwood Falls that I discussed earlier (15). In contrast to the external and fixed point of view of survey map and landscape painting, he emplaces himself bodily in the physical and inhabited landscape. While walking towards Jacobs' Mound, Heat-Moon describes how 'October grasses [...] reached to my belt and stunted my strides' and how

[f]rom the tall heads of Indian grass and the brown stalks of gayfeather, gossamer strung out in the slow wind like pennants ten and twelve feet long and silver in the sun, and these web lines snagged my trousers and chest and head until, after a mile, I was bestrung and on my way to becoming cocooned. (81-82)

Throughout *PrairyErth* a number of similar images seek to evoke placial immersion and the exchanges it involves between traveller and land, subject and object, as he crosses and circles it. We are told, for example, how the wind is trying 'to impress me into the prairie earth' and that '([a] walker displaces the territory as a swimmer does water, but a quiet sitter is a dropped stone and his ripples subside and water laps back in: submergence.)' (16, 367, brackets in original,). It is when travelling in such close proximity to the ground that the author notices how 'eyes yield to ears and nose' and

*'things thrust themselves right into your ears, up your nose. When you are on foot, life vibrates'* (367, 611, italics in original). As these images of emplacement suggest, there is a significant phenomenological element to Heat-Moon's Chase County travels in so far as they are bodily, tactile and palpable in their closeness to the ground and represented through tropes signalling an intensity of direct acquaintance.

It is, for example, by going 'slowly, almost inch by inch, on foot' and 'digging, sifting, sorting, [and] assembling shards' in this way that Heat-Moon, at once a 'grousing neo-primitivist' and literary archaeologist, records the particulars and qualitative multiplicities of the local prairie topography (223, 83, 16). In the first two quadrangles, 'Saffordville' and 'Gladstone', he uncovers and explores the significance of topographic phenomena such as flooding ('Upon the First Terrace'), tornados ('Under Old Nell's Skirt'), and prairie grasses and fires ('Along the Ghost Highway' and 'About the Red Buffalo') to the Plains ecology and inhabitants. In addition to these natural phenomena reflecting the writer's ecological predilections, he also probes into community history ('On the Town: Courthouse') and uncovers artefacts ('Below the Turf'), characters ('Between Pommel and Cantle', 'On the Town: Emma Chase'), events ('Regarding Fokker Niner-Niner-Easy'), and anecdotes of a vernacular landscape ('On the Town: A Night at Darla's') that until recently were commonly left out of academic or official history writing.

As the quotations in the opening paragraph of this part suggest, it is from this insistent and intense exploration of a local topography that he gains an intimate knowledge of the natural and cultural history of Chase County, and discovers the bending, flowing, and rhizomatic movements of the placial particulars – the smooth spaces – that reside between and below the striating lines of the grid and the historical myths that 'a couple of generations of American historians [...] let the public get by

with' (422). In a significant sense, then, topoanalysis practices ways of being and moving in place that are formally and qualitatively different from the gridded production and inhabitation of space. The vagabond traveller's bodily immersion in and close attention to local particulars yield placial knowledge by direct and continuing acquaintance that counters the abstracting and alienating gaze of the survey map, the fixed point of view of the landscape prospect, the striation of exact rational counting, and the detachment from place that enveloped travel at speed causes (364, 50-51, 16-17). In the notes of the author topoanalysis leads to the realisation that

[s]traightness in Kan illusion, short-sightedness – grid here not plane figure but chunk of webbed circles – isn't it obvious squared-up Kan isn't planogram but piece of sphere? Kansas is bent. (366)

#### *From Shard and Daub to Story*

From a structural and narrative point of view, Heat-Moon's topographic mapping of Chase county does not just displace one formal figure, the grid, with another, the topographic map. In the context of *PrairyErth*, the bending and winding of the Plains topography and Heat-Moon's 'jaunts' equate story lines that run beneath and transgress the lines of the grid that structure the text's surface. In Lotman's words that I quoted earlier, they 'cross the forbidden border which the plotless structure establishes' and in so doing are essential to alleviating the narrative poverty of cartographic mapping. The way landscape experience is mapped figuratively and narratively in this way is perhaps best illustrated by the topographic story map that retired Mexican railway worker Fidel Ybarra's draws as he speaks to the author about his life in Chase County.

On 'two sheets of typing paper precisely taped end to end like a scroll', Fidel begins by drawing 'twin parallel lines' with 'a yardstick', thus alluding to the linearity of both survey map and railway tracks (233). But gradually, as he adds houses, hotels, and bridges, lists 'the trackman's tools', and fills his map with 'inky points like little residents'. Fidel loses himself in a 'cartography' of story and memory (233). While immersed in place in this way, he 'draws in the ties of his tracks', a gesture which Heat-Moon appropriates figuratively and likens to 'that piece holding the railroad together, the predicate between subject and object, the linking between soil and rail. A trackman's days go to battling ties; as feet are to a walker, so ties are to a train' (236). To Heat-Moon, 'this map of a man's territory is the finest because it is the most wrought'; not only does the word wrought signal a winding topography of stories and memory but also the artifice that is required by story teller and writer to lift the particulars of place to literary expression in an attempt to 'tie' him- or herself to that place (236).

In many ways the salient tropes that Heat-Moon deploys to describe how Fidel Ybarra draws his storied map of Chase County are typical of the figurative confluences and representational hybridity that characterise *PrairyErth* as a 'topographic map of words' and 'landscape with figures' (15). Just as Fidel's icons, words, and painterly 'daubs' constitute the figurative raw material through which he evokes his inhabited experience, so Heat-Moon recurrently compares 'my words', that is, his 'shards', to painterly 'daubs', 'a kind of equivalence to the pointillist spots of ink that compose Dagwood's face' (335, 16, 336). In an extension of this conceit of a pointillist semantics and in stark contrast to the tradition of the mimetic landscape prospect, he also encourages his readers to 'see' the text as a polysemous artwork collage which, like Fidel's map, is at once 'picture, chart, chronicle, handbook' (234).

The literary pointillism and collage that Heat-Moon practices in *PrairyErth* can be further explicated if we look, firstly, at the polyglossic discourse on the Plains that we find in the collages of fragments that make up 'From the Commonplace Book'. On the one hand, the wide range of topics and genres represented in the Commonplace precludes delimits the thematic focus of individual quadrangles, while, on the other, their multitude of often contradicting voices also makes the reader aware that the Plains landscape is a cultural and textual construct that continues to evolve and be disputed. Secondly, in the chapter 'Around Half Past' the author contemplates a kind of post-impressionist pointillism when he proposes, in the manner of Claude Monet, to 'draw' the same view at the same time day after day: '[I]f I came to this little coign of vantage at half past two for the next month, the next year, how would my view of the prairie change?' (289). Lacking the will required to create such an 'assemblage of moments', Heat-Moon turns instead to his notebook for a shortcut and to gather 'a compendium of humdrum, a cutaway view of Chase County, Kansas, in the late 1980s' (289).

The painterly notion of words as daubs of paint, the text as a collage of 'shards', and a map of words are key conceits in Heat-Moon's attempt at imaginatively re-tropeing and attaching himself to the Plains place. They not only underpin two of the text's key metaphors, the 'topographic map of words' and the 'landscape with figures', but also help explain why aesthetic place-making, understood as a topographic ramble in search of equivalents – similes, metaphors, tropes – is figuratively and semantically different from representations of place in which defining elements stand in seemingly logical, rational, hierarchical, and transparent relation to one another. Here I am once again thinking of the cartographic survey map and the mimetic landscape prospect. By contrast, Heat-Moon's figurative

and narrative deployment of thick description as a kind of literary pointillism does not seek to construct a logically argued and spatially and temporally linear narrative of place. His hunt for ‘a fact or image and not thesis to hold my details together’ amounts instead to ‘a dense accumulation of ordinary information about a culture’ (14, 8). Just as Fidel Ybarra’s ‘inky points’ helped both story-teller and listener to imagine and attach himself to place, so the practitioner and reader of thick description is asked to observe ‘the details of life until they begin to coagulate or cohere into interpretation’ (233, 8). As Heat-Moon explains elsewhere on his writerly mapping of Chase County:

For me, writing is not a search for explanations but a ramble in quest of what informs a place, a hunt for equivalents. (I always envy the painter never having to ask, “Understand?” Were the choice ever offered, I’d want to be a Turner rather than a Twain.) (440)

Alternatively, if we extend the comparative conceit to the realm of Modernist landscape painting, Heat-Moon might usefully be described as a Pollock rather than a Mondrian.

### *Towards a New History of Place*

One way of explicating the pointillism and digressive course of Heat-Moon’s topographic word map is with reference to the fact that the travel writer’s topo-analytical approach does not try to force a pre-conceived form onto the land according to the laws of geometry, cartography or landscape painting or try to deduce such laws based on close observation of the particulars of place. Instead the immersed topo-analyst follows in the sense outlined by Deleuze and Guattari in their ‘Treatise on

Nomadology': 'It is a question of surrendering to the wood, then following where it leads by connecting operations to a materiality, instead of imposing a form upon matter: what one addresses is less a matter submitted to laws than a materiality possessing a *nomos*.' <sup>25</sup> As we have already seen, following in this manner leads not to a landscape reproduction from a fixed point of view but to an exploration and naming of the particulars – 'the "singularities" of matter' – of the prairie topography and landscape through notation and recording. <sup>26</sup>

Repeatedly, Heat-Moon's record of topographic 'shards' suggests that he is 'carried away by a vortical flow' such as the flow of the Cottonwood River, which 'so twists upon itself that it flows towards every point of the compass, a half-dozen times turning completely around' (315). When mapping in this way, the author does not 'discover a form' in the geometric sense but '*an energetic materiality in movement, carrying singularities or haecceities that are already like implicit forms that are topological, rather than geometrical*'. <sup>27</sup> In drawing forth the energetic materiality of the topographic features of the prairie grasslands, he thus counters the tendency of grid and landscape to seek a homogenising unity and closure in representing space and place; a unity and closure which, as we have already seen, is abstracting and erasing and comes at a cost culturally and discursively.

By following and hunting for 'equivalents', he engages instead 'in a continuous variation of variables', for example mapping as topoanalysis, archaeological digging, pictographic inscription and Native American weaving (440). <sup>28</sup> In turn, these variations lead to a figurative conflation of mapping, travelling, digging, writing, painting, sculpting, and weaving. The result is a semantic overdetermination of the Plains place which not only transgresses the striating and homogenising lines of grid and survey map but also deterritorialises the place in so far



as it ‘constitutes and extends the territory itself’.<sup>29</sup> In an ideologically subversive act, the tropical variations on mapping do so by giving form to a story and history of place whose movements follow those of the land: ‘in this county anyway, history assumes the aspect of the land it arises from and occurs upon’ (315).

*The Character of the Plot: incompleteness, un-closure, re-territorialisation*

As I argued above, the rhizomatic flows of the Chase County topography are a more appropriate metaphor for the structure of the text than the striating lines of the arbitrary quadrangles that provide it with a surface structure. Beneath the linear lines of the overarching grid, the stories of *PrairieEarth*’s topographic word map digress and ramble while exploring and recording the qualitative multiplicities or ‘secrets’ that the gaze of grid and landscape prospect overlook and imprison (365). Like the branches of the Osage orange tree, Heat-Moon’s stories or ‘jaunts, usually take [...] a digressive course’, and he values with Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* digressions as they are ‘*incontestably, ...the sunshine – they are the life, the soul of reading; take them out of this book for instance – you might as well take the book along with them*’ (280, 98, italics in original). The most straightforward way of demonstrating the digressive course of the text is by simply listing some of the many topics, events, and people that Heat-Moon comes across during his Chase County travels. Among them are natural phenomena such as flooding, tornados, prairie grasses and fires, medicinal plants, coyotes, hawks, and wood rats; past and present inhabitants, for example railway barons, abolitionists, cowboys, murderers, a feminist café owner and ditto rancher, ecological campaigners, a retired postmistress, and a group of high school students; ganglia such as a night out in a local bar, newspaper cuttings, a hawk lexicon, pioneer diaries, small-town history and gossip, the history of the Kaw

Indians, a plane crash, recurrent meditations on space, place, acts of naming and dreaming, and, finally, the writing of literature and history.

Whereas the straight lines of grid and quadrangle seek closure and control through a striating order, the poly-directionality, poly-vocality, and polysemy of *PrairyErth*'s digressive word map is exploratory, encyclopaedic and without closure. On this attitude and approach to travelling, Heat-Moon writes that '[g]oals are looser things, less tied to schedules, more amenable to circumnavigation than destinations, which seem to call for the straightest course possible: the one serves exploration, the other arrival' (279). The deterritorialising lack of closure that arises from Heat-Moon's vagabond exploration perhaps finds its most succinct expression in the renegade meta-chapter 'Until Black XTK Yields Its Light'. In this the last chapter of the book's final quadrangle, a novel variation on the grid trope draws a telling parallel between mapping and narrating. Instead of neatly closing the surface structure of *PrairyErth*'s word map, it likens the chapter to 'the kind of opening a Native American weaver leaves in a blanket for the spirit in the design to find release and travel on beyond' (599).

In addition to resisting the kind of unified and closed spatial narrative of which the grid is emblematic, this image also suggests that mapping in the sense of a 'topography of words' will always remain an incomplete and ongoing activity. At its most basic, Heat-Moon's word map is incomplete in a relativist sense 'because a book can't include everything': 'I've talked with more than ten percent of the countians, although no more than ten percent of even those three hundred appear in this book' (598). Incompletion in this sense implies that important stories have been left out and that 'all the Chase material I haven't found or that hasn't found me' may be just as representative as what he did find and chose to represent (599). This relativist sense of

incompletion also has epistemological ramifications. Heat-Moon, like the poetic voice in Robert Kroetsch's 'Stone Hammer Poem', has to concede that an object – in this case the Chase County landscape – can be grasped in a finite number of ways only: 'While I may pass my life in continuity and completeness, I comprehend it only in discontinuous fragments; of the lives of people around me my understanding is utterly fractured and piecemeal: scraps, shavings, smithereens' (335). Finally, linked to incompletion in its epistemological sense is a temporal feeling of arriving after the event and hence it being too late to tell the story of the place. This sense of it being always already too late Heat-Moon refers to as 'the archaeologist's perpetual unease that time is running out before the obliteration hits' (16).

Like Kroetsch's poetic persona in 'Stone, Hammer, Poem', then, Heat-Moon is restricted to trying to piece together a story of place from the fragments and gaps that his hunt for equivalents reveals as he traverses the terrain looking simultaneously forwards and backwards from a present. On the conditions under which the literary geographer-cum-archaeologist operates when mapping the continent's central grasslands, he writes in 'Across Osage Hill':

[M]y real equipage was a mind full of stories I'd heard about Osage Hill, pieces of the real hill, a Platonist might say: with the greater framework now lost, they were mere chips of narrative than whole tales, icons without an iconography, isolated pictographs that can remind a person and involve him in more than they actually were themselves; they were small configurations that had to be continually reinfused and reinvoked to keep them from becoming indecipherable. (336)

This passage explicitly states that the author does not harbour a realist illusion of completion and transparency. But even if incompleteness, lack of closure, and obscurity are facts, this does not mean that spatial representation and placial coherence is impossible or irrelevant. Nor should the absence of 'the greater framework' – for example a culturally dominant master narrative – and the presence of 'mere chips of narrative' be seen to suggest that the topographic word map is without form or thematic focus. Through an effort of the imagination, it is possible 'in something like a hallucination' to connect the pointillist shards – the 'chips of narrative', 'icons without an iconography', 'isolated pictographs' – into a meaningful word map of a place once real and imagined (335). According to Heat-Moon, his chips, shards and fragments 'quite early began forming into a gestalt that seems to control what I am capable of writing about' (598). The suggestion is that to the writer of place fragments and gaps possess an inherent potential that he or she may exploit through an effort of the imagination. Elsewhere he corroborates this notion of a significant spatial potential by comparing them to a Native American 'medicine bundle', a 'hawk medicine' that will help the storyteller to invoke and connect his fragments so that as part of a gestalt they become 'more than they actually were themselves' (441, 336).

In a similar way to Robert Kroetsch's field-note poetry, there is in *PrairieErth* a paradoxical sense in which the incomplete is more complete than the allegedly complete when it comes to the literary mapping of place. In addition to the loose thread in the Native American loom, we also find the potential but as yet unfulfilled placefulness of Heat-Moon's word map troped as a black page in 'Until Black Hole XTK Yields Its Light'. In a conceit that is at once playful and serious, Heat-Moon leaves this monochrome page for the reader to 'remove the portion of ink that isn't the topic to let the chapter stand revealed, the way a stone sculptor chips away only what

isn't his sculpture' (599). In making this participatory gesture, he presents his text as writerly in a manner similar to Lawrence Sterne in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*:

*There is a whole chapter wanting here – and a chasm of ten pages made in the book by it – but the book-binder is neither a fool, or a knave, or a puppy – nor is the book a jot more imperfect (at least upon that score) – but, on the contrary, the book is more perfect and complete by wanting the chapter, than having it. (546, italics in original)*

By evoking the potential placefulness of absences and incompleteness, these variations on mapping as weaving and sculpting not only invite the reader to rewrite the history of Chase County. They also exemplify the positive appropriation of the negative, for example, silences, slippages, gaps, ghosts, and the unknown that takes place in *PrairyErth*. The author aptly describes this negative capability, for example, when he refers to 'Until Black Hole XTK Yields Its Light' – 'XTK' is short for Unknown To Come – as 'a thing with a mystic gravitational field so intense its light can't escape to reach me' and as refusing to be pinned down since it is 'slipping from quadrangle to quadrangle' (597). Furthermore, it is also in evidence when he traces 'the ghosts' in the courthouse archives and makes symbolic use of anthropologist Joe Hickey's dream of 'three Kaws in dirty, ragged blankets. Nothing but bags of bones' who one night stood outside his bedroom window looking in at him (599, 560). As is the case with the notions of incompleteness and un-closure, the presence of absence that these spectres represent also ruptures the closure that the grid emblemises and challenges the ideology of a grand, unified history of space and place. They shatter, in

other words, the kind of ‘picture of the American West’ that a local historian describes as ‘no better than the dime novels of the 1880s – nationalistic, imperialistic, romantic, and distorted till hell won’t have it’ (421).

The tracing of absences, incompleteness, and spectres are not intended to create a placeless chaos – another wilderness or void however. They are part of an effort by the travel writer, firstly, to break open a historically and culturally dominant narrative of the Great Plains through an un-hiding of that which it obscures and erases. In insisting on unearthing the visible as well as invisible particulars of Chase County and with them the costs to the environment and Native American as well as settler cultures of a dominant spatial production and discourse, the influential frontier thesis is not just debunked as myth. In the words of Patricia Limerick, the frontier is also ‘suddenly reopened.’<sup>30</sup> That is to say, the production of Plains space whether in- or outside of text is continuous and without closure and takes place along non-essentialised, non-linear historical routes. Consequently, the history of the place cannot be neatly compartmentalised into pre- and post-frontier periods nor be told along spatially or temporally linear lines. But by unearthing the particulars of the landscape and following its contours, the topo-analytical travel writer can begin to trace, trope, and imagine an alternative narrative of place that is topological rather than geometrical. However, to understand more fully the form or ‘gestalt’ that this narrative takes and what it intends to do, we need first to look more closely at the trope of the archaeologist’s grid and then finally the trope of the deep map itself.

#### *Archaeologist Grid: troping depth and the palimpsest of place*

Up until this point my discussion of the topographic word map has focused mainly on its horizontal axis. But to explore the significance of mapping in the context of *PrairieEarth* more fully, it is necessary to pay attention to the depth or vertical axis of

Heat-Moon's word map also. Whereas the salient cartographic and topographic elements operate mainly at surface level of both place and text, the trope of the archaeologist's grid adds spatial and temporal depth to *PrairieEarth's* literary cartography of Chase County. We have already learnt that the grid lacks depth in the sense that it abstracts, erases and imprisons the particulars of the place that it purports to map. Lack of depth is not restricted, however, to cartographic survey maps but extends to even the most detailed topographic map. Heat-Moon cites an extract from Barry Lopez' *Desert Notes* in which we are warned that even maps 'with every bush and stone clearly marked, the meandering courses of dry rivers and other geographical features noted' are 'too thin' (4). The implication is that just as topoanalysis on the ground is necessary to unearth the particulars of the place, so an exploration of the landscape's vertical axis is needed if one is to know and attach oneself to it 'in any real and lasting way' (105). Heat-Moon succinctly summarises this belief when he ends his Claude glass experiment by stating 'that forward or backward didn't matter so much as did the depth of the view, a long transit at once before and behind; the extent of cherishing depends upon the amplitude of the ken' (269).

To add depth and verticality to the rhizomatic and horizontal windings of topographic figures such as waterways, roots, and branches, Heat-Moon imagines that the quadrangles of the geological survey map constitute the 'kind of grid such as an archaeologist lays over ground he will excavate' (15). As a figure of depth, the archaeologist's grid helps the writer's efforts to subvert the shallow striating lines of the survey map by pointing him towards such spatially and temporally deep histories as those of archaeology ('Below the Turf'), geology ('Above the Crystalline Basement'), and, as we shall see in the last part of this chapter, dreamtime ('Across Osage Hill'). The type of deep history of space and place in question is set out in a

passage on the Nemaha Mountains that lie beneath the present-day Flint Hills. The passage describes the dialogic, cyclical, and palimpsest movements that have shaped Chase County geologically beneath the erasing gaze of the grid. Like the flows of waterways, branches, and roots, these movements may meaningfully be viewed as a metaphor for the history of the county's cultural landscape also, reminding us once again of how in significant but often overlooked ways 'history assumes the aspect of the land it arises from and occurs upon' (315):

The history here is this: a sea transgressing, regressing, transgressing, in and out, up and down, higher, lower, always advancing, withdrawing always, and always leaving something behind, the sea conceiving stone, and the rock bearing living things that turn mineral solutions – calcium carbonates – into shell and bone, and bone becoming stone again, and that too waiting to become again; and everywhere cycles, and cycles within cycles, and the sea laying down strata like shrouds over the old life, and then the corrupting winds and waters coming to resurrect. The Nemahas rose, were partly eroded, subsided, and were buried, all of this happening in the Eastern Hemisphere; and, then, slowly and passively like a casket, the range got carried into the Western world to come here – to what appears a permanent resting place – where the thirty-eight parallel crosses the ninety-sixth meridian; so, in this way, Chase County, Kansas, migrated from the far other side just as its human inhabitants were to do.

(158)



Here we see how the transgressing and regressing movements of the region's geological history are emblematic of a deep history of ongoing erasure, sedimentation, transformation, and migration; in other words, a history of space and place that is not linear, progressive, fixed, transparent or closed. To the Euro-American eye the prairie may commonly have appeared and subsequently been troped as a 'permanent resting place'. But as this and several other passages in *PrairyErth* make clear, this perception and representation of the prairies merely forms part of a discourse formation that understands space as a fixed, static, and enclosed home place. As part of a wider ideological mediation of the relationship between people and place, it has commonly taken the form of a progressive placial narrative that favours, in the words of Heat-Moon, destination over circumnavigation, arrival over exploration, and the 'straightest course possible'. In the context of this study, Alexandra Bergson's agrarian homestead at the beginning of 'Neighbouring Fields' provides the most clear-cut example of this type of teleological place-making (279). But we have also seen how the spectre of the idealised agrarian homestead – the landscape garden – reappears in literary geographies of the Plains region throughout the twentieth century. We hear it, for example, when Robert Kroetsch writes in 'After Paradise', the 'final' poem of his *Completed Field Notes* that 'The fear of/ paradise/ haunts all our/ dreams...' and when Kathleen Norris in *Dakota: a spiritual geography* writes of a fossilised version of the progressive dream that still informs the way some inhabitants in Lemmon, South Dakota imagine their prairie community.<sup>31</sup>

What Heat-Moon's exploration of grid, topography, and archaeology does is demonstrate that spatial recovery narratives commonly obscure and erase important layers of the natural and inhabited landscape. In part, they do so by misrepresenting the Plains as empty or virgin, thus, in effect, creating the kind of mythico-ideological

starting point from which Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* is able to lift the land out of 'geological ages' and transform a sea of grass into an agrarian home place. The distorting operations of this type of mythic and mythicising place-making in the case of the central grasslands are succinctly explained by anthropologist Joe Hickey:

*You walk around here, and you begin to believe you're the first to pass over any given spot, but you aren't of course. Indians lived in this watershed for at least six thousand years, from the Archaic era through the Ceramic and on to the historic tribes – Quivirans, Wichitas, Osage, Kansa. A short view of time distorts the emptiness up here. These uplands and especially the creek bottoms have been full of occupation since before King Tut. (102, italics in original)*

By contrast, the deep palimpsest landscape that Heat-Moon excavates has no known natural, permanent, or originary state or starting point. From a literary point of view, he may be said to write on top of the always already, that is, the geographies and cartographies that have already been published and are in circulation as documented by the Commonplace Book. In writing and mapping with and against these texts, he both unearths and erases parts of their landscapes. In turn, another map begins to take form. It lays down another 'strata like a shroud' over the old texts; a shroud whose particulars both reveal and conceal, include and exclude, yet are shot through with the spectres of the past. However, such a map made up of shards does not arrive at 'a permanent resting place', a fixed, closed, and complete map of a unitary and homogenous place. Its particulars form parts of an incomplete contingent structure only. What the word map leaves out may be just as significant as what it includes.

But, importantly, its incomplete, open-ended structure should not be seen to signify placelessness. It possesses a degree of spatial coherence due to a process of creative place-making that enables the writer to connect placial particulars, his shards, daubs, and points. Hence, the process of erasure, finding, transformation, and sedimentation not only gives form to place, it also becomes part of a counter discourse. What the literary cartographer's deep mapping does is make a textual intervention in a culturally dominant discourse on space and place. It does so in order to dispute and alter the face of the Plains as well as the character of the plot, showing, on the one hand, that the landscape is always already under way and, on the other, that change is not only possible but also necessary at times.

Understood in this way, the natural, inhabited, and textual spaces of Chase County and, by synecdoche, the Plains region become both products and producers of a continuous series of inscriptions by natural and cultural forces. Figuratively, the transgressions and regressions of waters, soils, and rocks apply not only to the man-made landscape but also to the representational spaces of *PrairyErth* with its recurrent conflations of mapping, writing, painting, and sculpting. For the latter reason, it can be argued that Heat-Moon's text, like a piece of conceptual art, does not so much de- as re-materialise place. In a significant sense, space, place and landscape may meaningfully be understood as layered sites within which different co-existing and interrelated forces and agents jostle for influence, power and hegemony in terms of how we see, understand, represent, and indeed live on the prairies. In a passage linking the palimpsest movements of the region's deep past to those of the Chase County landscape of late modernity, Heat-Moon demonstrates how this view of spatial production does not apply to space in a merely abstract or formal sense:

This corner of the county is a place of energy transfer. The oldest is nutrient passage from sea to rock to soil to grass to ungulates to man, and next is that of generation to generation; now oil gets drawn from the shales, natural gas courses the pipelines from western Kansas to Chicago, high-tension lines hump electric power east to west, microwave relay towers kick along information between the coasts, and there's the railroad and the interstate, these last five all striking about the same angle across the county. In a place as apparently still as the under-rock itself, transit and translation lie all over this quiet corner. (103)

The 'transgressing, regressing, transgressing' of natural forces here takes the form of 'transit and translation' as it applies not only to rock, soil, grass, and generations of men but also to the dominant economic and political forces that shape the contemporary Plains landscape. Heat-Moon's mapping along Chase's vertical as well as horizontal axis reveals that the striating flows of modern and post-modern industries and infrastructures such as roads, oil, gas, electricity, and telecommunications are material manifestations that refute the notion of the Plains 'as apparently still as the under-rock itself' or indeed a 'permanent resting place'. In doing so, their visible and invisible flows do not only corroborate the notion of space and place as continuously being overwritten but also contribute formally to Heat-Moon's vision of a changing face of the Plains place at the level of trope and narrative. Like waterways, roots, and branches, they seek to capture an experiential sense of being in a place of movement and mobility.

However, from a socio-historical perspective, these energy transfers equate contemporary striating flows that run parallel to the lines of the quadrangles. Like the

grid, they are modern-day expressions of rationality in action, ‘all striking about the same angle across the county’. In a Lefebvrian analysis of how space is socially produced, they are exemplary of how rational and conceived representations of space continue to shape and control social and physical space. As such the linear flows of the contemporary surface are also spatially productive in a representational sense. They form part of a culturally dominant discourse that presents the spaces of the US and its regions as progressive and improving. Moreover, because the flows of pipelines, powerlines, and roads contribute to this modern meta-narrative, they run counter to Heat-Moon’s neo-primitivist sensibility, and hence are seen not as ‘marks of a progressive civilization but [...] of the continuing onslaught’ of the prairies (83).

On the one hand, Heat-Moon’s exploration of the vertical and horizontal axis of Chase County gives an insight into a dominant production and representation of space and place. Like the region’s spatial template, the grid, the power and pipelines that now run across it are emblematic of how a culture, a nation, and a society that believes in and values progress informed by science and technology and the forces of free-market economics continues to dominate the shaping of the Plains landscape. On the other hand, the travel writer’s topoanalysis and literary archaeology also uncovers the particulars and traces the flow on and below the surface of this landscape. In turn, these particulars – his shards and daubs – are put to imaginative use in an attempt to re-conceive and re-trope Chase County. As we have already seen, this involves a good deal of linguistic playfulness and conceits that figuratively conflate mapping tropes. However, it has also been suggested that these tropes do not serve a purely formal or aesthetic purpose intended merely to change the literary face of the place. The palimpsest flows and movements of Heat-Moon’s topographic and archaeological

word map are also defining features of his deep map, the key vehicle for the travel writer's ideological critique of the way the place has been mapped and inhabited.

*Deep Mapping in a Dreamtime Cartography*

The figure that more than any other encompasses the vertical and horizontal movements of both the topographic map and the archaeologist's grid is that of the deep map or landscape. But whereas the topo-analyst and the archaeologist mainly operate at the level of fact, the deep map traveller has come to realise 'that facts carry a traveler only so far: at last he must penetrate the land by a different means, for to know a place in any real and lasting way is sooner or later to dream it' (105). From a formal point of view, this way of being in and imagining place is given its most concise expression in a passage describing Heat-Moon's 'hike down another's man dream':

Two-dimensional Rand McNally travellers who see a region as having borders will likely move in only one locality at a time, but travellers who perceive a place as part of a deep landscape in slow rotation at the center of a sphere and radiating infinite lines in an indefinite number of directions will move in several regions at once. (246)

Like the poly-directional and non-linear movements of waterways, branches, and roots, the deep map trope's synthesis of lines, directions, and movement is suggestive of horizontal and vertical travel in a landscape that is spatially and temporally multi-dimensional and without closure. As such it stands in obvious contrast to the flat two-dimensional surface of the landscape painter's canvas, the cartographer's map, and, in narrative terms, stories of teleological and linear progress. As readers and armchair

travellers, Heat-Moon wants to engage us in a series of formal experiments and ask us to conceive, perceive, and imagine the prairie through a complex and hybrid 'figuration'. The deep map or, more to the point, the act of deep mapping is synesthetic in so far as it requires bodily immersion, sensory perception, and travelling on the ground and page. But whereas travel on the ground and on the page are necessary to the acquisition of expert local knowledge, the opening quotations of the final part of this chapter make it abundantly clear that they are not sufficient if one is to know and belong to a place 'in the deepest sense' (613, 105). For that to happen 'dreaming' or mapping a place in 'dreamtime' is required (336).

To the author, mapping in a dreamtime cartography is most importantly a creative and imaginative activity. At one point he remarks that '[p]eople connect themselves to the land as their imaginations allow' (84). That is not to say, however, that dreamtime mapping is confined solely to the realms of the imagination and writing; it is enabled by and practiced while travelling on the ground. Heat-Moon claims quite literally to walk 'down another man's dream' when tracing the overgrown trackbed of the Orient Road, the railroad Arthur Stilwell imagined would link the markets of the Midwest with those of the Pacific and Asia (246). Likewise, he also goes 'bodily into a topographic dreamtime' when travelling '*into*' Oxford, Mississippi, the real place upon which the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County of William Faulkner's literary geography is modelled and overlaid (448, italics in original). But despite the interrelatedness of travel on the ground and in dreamtime, Heat-Moon is unambiguous as to the relationship between the two: 'travel writing is a tour twice taken, and which one is more real depends on how you value dreamtime' (440).

The key words in the last sentence are ‘real’ and ‘value’ as they signal the elevated status of the realm of dreamtime to literary deep mapping and the ideological intent of the type of place-making that takes place in this realm:

To American Indians who believe that the past is to a people as dreams are to a person, stories are the communal snaggings of generations, the nets that keep people from free-falling toward pointlessness, as did my cousin, and they are also the knots of matter that help people into dreamtime, where the listener, the traveller, can imagine he sees links between smithereens; from that hallucination, everything we value arises. I’m speaking about shards and grids and crossings, about the great reticulum, our past. (336)

In a passage of typical figurative density and confluences, Heat-Moon explains the workings of mapping in a cartographic dreamtime. On the one hand, story-telling is central to his dreamtime cartography because it is a medium for configuring memory. That is to say, stories or narratives are a kind of map – ‘nets’, ‘knots of matter’ – that help communities and individuals attach themselves to and give meaning to place, and, by implication, prevent them from drifting into placelessness. On the other hand, stories are also instrumental to place-making in the sense that they help people enter the creative realm of dreamtime where the imagination can give form to and lift place to expression by connecting ‘smithereens’, that is, the ‘shards’, daubs, and ‘details’ that the topo-analyst and archaeologist’s meanderings unearth (336, 14). From a literary and artistic point of view, mapping in dreamtime is, in other words, closely related to the practices of literary pointillism and collage that I described earlier:



‘Even more than autobiography, biography and history and literature and all the arts are far-flung bits reassembled into an illusion of completeness so that we comprehend only by orts’ (335).

The core metaphor or trope that binds the ‘far-flung bits’ of remembering, story-telling, digging, recording, painting, sculpting, dreaming, and hallucinating together in *PrairyErth* is weaving: mapping as weaving. In a first variation on the trope of the grid, it is given symbolic form through a proto-calligraphic pictogram or icon found on the hard cover of the 1991 Andrew Deutsch edition.<sup>32</sup> At first glance this icon is suggestive of both calligraphic sign and cartographic grid, but upon closer inspection one notices that its seemingly straight and linear lines are slightly curved and bending. Moreover, they are not simply printed on the planiform space of a white sheet of paper but engraved or impressed into the grainy, limestone-coloured cardboard cover, thus alluding to geography (lit. earth writing) as quite literally an inscription onto and immersion into the ground. In doing so, the proto-calligraphic grid icon not only signals that mapping demands a material and physical engagement with place but also that it is a textual and semiotic activity that takes place on the page conceived as a writing scene on which place takes shape as words, signs, metaphors, and tropes are spaced out and woven together. As Edward Casey has observed on Jacques Derrida’s notion of texts as built and buildings/places as written, “-tecture” and “textual” are, along with “texture,” linguistic cousins in the text-family of words – a family held together by the common metaphor of weaving, itself a fundamental form of creative spacing in human experience.’<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the proto-calligraphic grid icon embodies and signals the linguistic, structural, and textural interweaving of material artefacts, stories, events, etc. that becomes *PrairyErth*’s deep map or landscape of Chase County.

In *PrairyErth*, then, it is ‘creative spacing’ in dreamtime that gives form to place and in the process of doing so ‘everything we value arises’, that is to say, we learn to cherish and ‘come to belong to it [place] in the deepest sense’ (105). In deliberate contrast to the planiform, homogenous, and empty space of the Western or Euro-American cartographic map, which in Heat-Moon’s analysis voids and imprisons place and alienates its inhabitants from it, the structure of *PrairyErth*’s dreamtime cartography is multi-dimensional, non-linear, and always already filled and being filled with a motley array of events. The form that the literary deep map or landscape takes is like the ‘conflated time of the American Indian’, it possesses ‘breadth, depth, and oneness’ (15, 264). Its space-time is, as Heat-Moon explains, like the time of the ‘[Pawtucket-Mimac Indian] Nompenekit [who] thinks of it as a lake or pool in which all events are contained’ (260, italics in original). In addition, by spatialising time and conceiving of it as deep, moving, and boundless, *PrairyErth*’s deep map of Chase County is also non-temporocentrist unlike conventional Western histories of space and place.<sup>34</sup> The deep present of Heat-Moon’s aboriginal dreamtime thus serves to counter the widespread, common-sense conception of space – and place abstracted to space – as a homogenous and empty void or scene that is teleologically destined to be filled and moulded over time by heroic actors such as *O Pioneers!*’s Alexandra Bergson. Spatialising time becomes, in other words, a means to contesting the common American rhetoric and meta-narrative of recovery that represents space and place as linearly progressive and moving towards a future of ever brighter prospects.

### *The Boundless Oneness of the Deep Map*

From a rational and structural perspective it may seem paradoxical that a changing and rotating landscape which is made up of fragments that have ‘to be continually

reinfused and reinvoked to keep them from becoming indecipherable', and which radiates 'infinite lines in an infinite number of directions' should possess a 'oneness' and be *both* 'much more unified *and* unlimited than the European conception' of time and space (336, 246, 264, emphasis added). To understand how this can be and why it is the case in *PrairyErth*, it is necessary to return briefly to the travel writer's belief in, or perhaps conceit of, a dreamtime cartography. On the one hand, weaving as mapping means that the space-time of the Chase County deep map avoids the reductive closure, fixity, and imprisonment that the writer associates with rational gridded mapping in particular and Euro-American settlement more generally. Throughout the text several mapping tropes based on the concept of weaving represent space as boundless but not without form. In addition to the 'infinite lines' of the 'deep landscape', we encounter, the 'kind of opening a Native American weaver leaves in a blanket', and 'hawk medicine' as 'a bundle of collected sticks and feathers' (246, 440, 599). In a similar manner, we can also trace a palimpsest boundlessness in phrases describing the movements of Chase's spatial history as 'transgressing, regressing, transgressing' and 'transit and translation' (158, 103). Moreover, from the point of view of travelling, boundlessness is also significant to the production of an affective belonging to place. In contrast to the detachment experienced from car, plane, and painterly vantage points, it denotes an immersed vagabond experience of being in place that is at once immense and intense.

On the other hand, weaving is also said to result in placial unity and oneness. In light of my comments on boundlessness above, this is only possible, I believe, if it is understood as coherence rather than completeness or closure. The creation of a sense of coherence and unity is possible because weaving enables the dreamtime cartographer to see 'links between smithereens' and thus to re-attach him- or herself

to a place from which many of its inhabitants have been alienated and which has suffered cultural and environmental erasure, destruction, and loss (336). In offering a sense of unity and oneness, weaving as mapping in an American Indian dreamtime addresses the root problem identified by Heat-Moon and his travel companion the Venerable Tashmoo, namely that Western or Euro-American thinking in general and rational mapping and place-making in particular is based on *'dualistic thinking: splitting and separating things rather than seeing the web. We turn creation into good or evil, body or soul, man and nature'* (619, italics in original). In addition to his critical variations on the grid, Heat-Moon elaborates on how this mode of analytical thinking reduces and impoverishes place and space in a passage in which he quotes a cousin who once worked on a doctorate in particle physics at Kansas University:

*I kept going after matter – structures – and I kept going until I saw that when you go inward far enough there's almost nothing there. Everything is space with tiny pieces strung out only in propinquity to each other. My crisis was about learning to live in the interstices by hugging up to little particles.* (335, italics in original)

In the face of abstract analytical space, the 'illusion of completeness' and 'oneness' in a dreamtime cartography becomes indicative of a longing to re-attach oneself to place 'in the deepest sense'; a longing which in *PrairyErth* is articulated through tropes which, as the author admits, may be nothing but 'conducive to useful delusion', or in literary terms, a conceit (335, 264, 442).

The reason the reader is asked to believe that the boundless, infinite, and incomplete deep map possesses a 'oneness' and unity, then, is firstly to displace a

culturally dominant mode of inquiring into, producing, and narrating space of which the cartographic grid is emblematic. Having done so, it then seeks to replace it with a different history of space and place, the culturally hybrid narrative of the deep map. Whereas the rational paradigm of the former tends to homogenize and abstract place and in the process obscure and erase qualitative multiplicities pertaining to geography, ecology, and history, the ‘neo-primitivist’ notions informing the latter seek to get a critical take on it by particularising and materialising place (83). In doing so, it not only exposes such clouding and erasure, it also puts forward, as we shall see shortly, an argument for sustainable inhabitation.

In brief, then, dreamtime is the valued imaginative realm in which the literary cartographer configures into coherent, polyvalent tropes the multitude of shards that his topoanalysis and archaeological grousing on the ground yield. In doing so, he connects to and learns to value the spatial, historical, mental, and affective depths of Chase County. From the point of view of a literary geography, the trope of the deep map and its accompanying narrative not only changes the face of the prairie place through its subversive variations on the figure of the grid and its displacement of the painterly landscape prospect. As the recurrent references to Native American notions of place and space suggest, this re-trope Plains place is also a cultural hybrid that espouses and attaches different beliefs, knowledges and values to Chase County and by synecdoche the Plains region.

### *From History towards Myth*

The appropriation of Native American spatial ideas and placial praxes is key to Heat-Moon’s deep mapping in a cartographic dreamtime and his revalorisation of a marginal and often invisible Plains locale. In contrast to rational and scientific modes of mapping, the indigenous ideas and praxes introduce a notion of space as ‘not

quite...supernatural', 'almost unearthly', and 'beyond the comprehension of reason' into literary place making (441, 14, 442):

[A]lways I return to a belief that the source of my work is not so much reason as something darker and less comprehended, something arising from dreamtime. For the long journey into the prairie that I was just beginning, that obscure medicine had somehow taken on the form of hawkness. I'm not quite saying that this figure-hawk is supernatural but rather only suggesting a less conscious mind using an emblem to reach toward a vague awareness and push it to the surface where shallow reason can look it over. (441)

Rather than Enlightenment reason, we are told that the origin of the key spatialising tropes and 'configurations' that characterise the deep map is 'dreamtime' (15, 441). Among the key tropes is a 'figure-hawk' that Heat-Moon likens to a 'medicine bundle' in 'an Indian sense', that is, a 'power that can infuse a mind or a beast or a bundle of collected sticks and feathers' (441). It is in the capacity of a 'darker', quasi-supernatural productive topos that dreamtime throws up the 'imaginary lines and questions and loomings' that guide Heat-Moon's travel writing formally and thematically. It gives form to the 'gestalt that seems to control what I am capable of writing about' (598).

The alleged presence of a quasi-supernatural power in the creative act of deep mapping edges *PrairyErth*'s literary geography and history towards the realm of the mythical and a-historical, and signals the author's inclination towards the mystical, or, as one critic has argued, the romantic.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the examples cited above, we

also learn that a friend of the author describes him as '*a two-bit mystic*', and that his deep map of Chase County first began taking shape around a Native American 'Ouija board' which told him that his new book would begin with the word 'GOIN WEST, BRO' and have 'LAND' as its subject (14, 441, italics in original). Moreover, the board answered his questions about his writing by letting it be known that his helper would be a 'W-I-N-D' 'R-I-D-E-R' or in other words a 'H-A-W-K' (14, 441). This leaning towards the mystical and spiritual seems at odds with the obvious historical situatedness and materiality of the travel writer's going slowly across Chase County as well as his interest in the flows of its topography and geology that give an at once empirical and imaginative form to the deep map's non-linear and palimpsest spatial history. Despite the deep map's historically grounded critique of Euro-American settlement, its author nonetheless recurrently entertains the idea that its origin and form is to be found not in the land but in a quasi-supernatural and -mystical dreamtime realm.

It must be noted, however, that Heat-Moon repeatedly modifies and questions his supernatural and mythic rhetoric and leanings in ways that are important to an understanding of the imagined Plains place of his deep map. His use of language, for example, reveals that his 'belief' in the 'darker' and 'less comprehended' realms of the meta-physical is riddled with doubts. We learn that his notion of 'hawk medicine' is 'not quite' supernatural, but '*rather only* suggesting a less conscious mind' (441, emphasis added). In addition, he also concedes that 'hawk medicine' may sound like 'self-deception, hallucination' to 'the strict rationalist' and that it may be no more than 'a longing conducive to useful delusion' (442). With a similar hint of self-reflexive pragmatism, he also proposes that dreaming is an 'illusion that helps me see things here, to imagine how things have been' (14). Words such as self-deception,

delusion and illusion, and the phrase ‘a less conscious mind’ all suggest that the power of dreamtime place-making is as much the product of the imagination and psyche as a supernatural and mythical topos.

Equally, the notion that delusions can be ‘useful’ is another sign that the function of dreamtime is as much pragmatic and strategic as idealist. As we have already seen, the quasi-mysticism and -supernatural origins of the deep map is key to addressing the author’s longing to become re-attached to a place which in his view has suffered erasure, loss, and alienation due to the dominance of culturally specific modes of place-making. In this context, hawk medicine as a ‘useful delusion’ is instrumental to the creation in the narratives of art, literature, and history of an ‘illusion of completeness’ that allows people to enter dreamtime and connect to, value, and cherish place (335). This counter- and intercultural function of Heat-Moon’s dreamtime cartography is also in evidence in the juxtaposition of a ‘strict rationalist’ with a deluded dreamtime cartographer. They demarcate conflicting subject positions in a regional literary geography in which Euro-American and Native American notions and modes of spatial production, representation, and inhabitation have collided and, in the case of *PrairyErth*, become hybridised.

Besides, the rhetoric of mysticism and the supernatural is consistently modified and undermined by the author’s recurrent doubts, a self-deprecating sense of humour and irony, and an insistence on situating his own subject in the historical present of the late 1980s. In a telling episode in the last chapter, ‘Circlings’, he breaks off a walk down an ancient Kaw trail to hitch a ride with a local farmer to the nearest diner in order to have a cheese burger and milk shake. All these elements are indicative of an awareness that grounding place-making in a mystical, supernatural dreamtime risks clouding or glossing over contemporary territorial conflicts



pertaining to socio-economics, politics, ecology, ethnicity, and gender; that is to say, exactly the sort of territorial disputes that Heat-Moon wants to address because they pose a threat to the Plains region. So even though Heat-Moon's dreamtime imaginary does aim to generate an affective attachment to place, we can see that at the same time it is wary of becoming an example of the kind of regionalist writing in which, as Roberto Maria Dainotto has demonstrated, place functions as a sentimental substitute for history deploying a rhetoric that obscures the erasures performed by Western European and US imperialism.<sup>36</sup>

I want to suggest therefore that Heat-Moon's deep mapping in dreamtime is deployed more strategically and tactically than as a straightforward and sincere essentialist grounding of place in the nebulous realm of the supernatural. It serves, in other words, a political and ideological purpose rather than an idealistic attempt at anchoring the Chase County landscape in an a-historical, meta-physical realm. Further evidence that the author harbours such intentions can be extrapolated from his persistent scepticism towards and interrogation of the type of reason that informs America's progressive meta-narrative of spatial recovery. In accordance with his critique of 'dualistic thinking' and Western science whether in the form of particle physics or cartographic mapping, Heat-Moon claims that the source of his work is 'not so much reason' and that reason is 'shallow' (441). Similarly, he also juxtaposes Western and aboriginal peoples and practices, for example the penchant of 'the strict rationalist' for 'pigeonholing' his figure hawk and labelling the author's belief in it as 'self-deception and hallucination' (441). In reply, the neo-primitivist in the writer retorts that '[p]eople not yet completely seduced by European rationalism often believe something strong but beyond the comprehension of reason attaches itself to images and names' (442).

Instead of a 'thesis' and pigeonholing within a hierarchical taxonomy, the travel writer is in pursuit of 'images', 'names', 'facts', and 'shards', since, in his own words, he would prefer 'to be a Turner rather than Twain' (14, 16, 440). Put differently, we may say that he is in pursuit of a *nomos* rather than a *logos*. One might argue, of course, that the search for images and painterly modes of representation is itself somewhat paradoxical and conceited considering that *PrairyErth* is for the most part a conventional book made up of letters, metaphors, passages, and chapters and not daubs of paint or chiselled rock. We can, however, make sense of this conceit if we keep in mind that the point of it is not to try to understand place by counting and indexing its elements in a logical representational system seeking closure. Doing so would, as we have seen, de-contextualise and abstract it whereas Heat-Moon's tropical conceits allow him to re-contextualise place as he transfers it from the ground to page. Through his dreamtime mapping, the author wants the reader to grasp the poetry and mystery immanent in placial artefacts, images, names, and acts of naming, 'the something strong but beyond the comprehension of reason'. Throughout the text, this mode of naming and imaging place is what Heat-Moon, the 'grousing neo-primitivist', refers to as 'the primitive method', and it takes as its mapping icon the ideogram of the proto-calligraphic grid (83, 442). Situated in the context of an intercultural territorial dispute with rationalism on one side and a hybrid neo-primitivism on the other, *PrairyErth*'s dreamtime cartography is, in a significant sense, mythico-poetic: 'when you finish reading, go outside and find a living thing you do not know the name of and look at it closely and give it one of your own making; then it will become yours to carry into dreamtime [...] and, until we become nomenclators of a place, we can never really enter it' (442).

Yet it must be remembered that to say that the deep map or the primitive method is anti-rational is not the same as saying that it is uncritical, lacking in sense, or leading to absurdity, although it occasionally does. The logic informing its analytical and representational approaches to space and place is merely of a different order to those of Western rationalism or purported rationality that we saw outlined in Heat-Moon's analysis of the grid as an emblem of imperial-colonial place making. Just as the primitive method does, so the deep map's palimpsest and non-linear topology of infinite lines running in an indefinite number of directions purposefully de- and reterritorialises rational Euro-American modes of mapping, representing, and imagining space and place. Viewed from an intercultural perspective, the function of the deep map is to offer an alternative to the dominant meta-narrative of progress, which in Heat-Moon's analysis is essentially regressive and declensionist. In addition to being a topos for creative spacing, Heat-Moon's dreamtime cartography is also intended to formulate an anti-rational argument and give expression to a non-linear reverse recovery narrative that counters the spatial and placial impoverishment, loss, and alienation that is the result of a modernist place-making tradition informed by science, technology and capitalism.

#### *An Ethics of the Aesthetics.*

In addition to being aesthetic, creative spacing in dreamtime also has an important ethical and activist dimension. Deep mapping in a cartographic dreamtime does not only appropriate aboriginal knowledge of space and place to change the face of the literary Plains place and represent the history of Chase County as a palimpsest and non-linear deep present of 'transit and translation'. It undertakes this re-trope to forge a belonging to place that advocates ecologically sustainable inhabitation in response to a loss of biological diversity, knowledge of the local ecology, and the

erosion and pollution of both soil and water that threaten not only the environment but also the viability of a 'way of life' (243). As we shall see in the final part of this chapter, this eco-ethics of the deep-map aesthetics is informed partly by Native American knowledge of and ways of inhabiting the Plains grasslands and partly by a Western ecological tradition dating back to Henry Thoreau's *Walden*. In particular, it shares with the latter an ideal of 'sustainable agriculture with nature as its model' (493).

According to the author, Native American knowledge of and ways of inhabiting the Plains grasslands are inherently ecological since they respect and seek to preserve complete ecosystems based on the realisation that life on the Plains depends finally on natural diversity. For this reason, while walking the winding Kaw trail in the epilogue 'Circlings', Heat-Moon speaks to his friend and travel companion, the Venerable Tashmoo, of how 'we needed a new generation of ghost dancers who could infuse in all of us an Indian interpretation of the great chain of being' and how 'the link here between the health of the land and human welfare was so immediate – the people so directly dependent on the prairie – that I was continually surprised to see the exploitation they tolerated or engaged in' (618). Elaborating on the author's analysis, his travel companion – or is it his lecturing, moralising alter ego? – points to Native Americans as offering advice on how to reverse the present direction of '*exploitation*' leading towards '*extinction*' which will

*continue until preachers start speaking up about a new ecological Christianity to replace our old egological one. Of all the loomings you talk about, that may be the biggest. Indians didn't worship armadillos, but they did honor their existence because they respected what produces life.*

*Even those stones are on their way to becoming bones.* (619-20, italics in original)

Just as the Indian ethos of respecting that which produces life is central to the deep view of the prairies that Heat-Moon puts forward in *PrairyErth*, so it also features centrally in the thinking and practices of local Western ecologists such as Wes Jackson, Larry Wagner, Jane Beedle Koger. In the words of Koger that I quoted earlier: *'If anyone anywhere should be environmentalists, all of us here should: if we lose the land's productivity, we've lost our hope of living here'* (193, italics in original).

According to geneticist, experimental Plains farmer, and environmental writer Wes Jackson, the key to ensuring the land's productivity is overcoming *'our ecological illiteracy and see[ing] that answers are more cultural than technological'* (504, italics in original). Like the pre-settlement Kansa and Osage Indians before them, Heat-Moon shares with contemporary Western ecologists such as Jackson the view that man is part of the eco-system, *'man in nature'*, and therefore cannot afford to continue farming as *'a fundamentally extractive enterprise'* and view *'the plains as a place of mining economies'* (619, 498, italics in original). In his analysis of *'capitalism [as] an extractive system that bases its strength on eventual exhaustion'*, Jackson argues that *'European descendants have gone from one mining or extractive economy to another'* (498, italics in original). Historically, these economies have been capitalist and proved to be environmentally unsustainable. In the view of Jackson, the Venerable, and the author, they have also failed to curb the sin of greed in the same way that the view of man as separate from nature – *'man and nature'* – has failed to curb the sin of pride. It is for this reason that *'the ecologist can also say it's pride –*

*and greed[...] - that separates us from creation and allows us to believe that only we could possibly be the children of God*' (619, italics in original).

To the most prominent and influential ecological voice in *PrairyErth*, Wes Jackson, the cultural as opposed to technological solution is *'to find, as the Amish have, a way to assess our technology against a standard that controls the sin of pride, the desire to possess more power and goods than are justly ours'* (499, italics in original). To Jackson, and with him Heat-Moon, that cultural standard is *'nature'* and *'native prairie'* in so far as they make us *'think about the basic unit of our study: the community – a diversity of species living together'* (497, italics in original). Whereas Wes Jackson has set about developing *'a prototype of a new agricultural community'* which mimics *'the prairie to feed people without also endangering them and eroding and poisoning the earth'*, Heat-Moon's contribution to overcoming ecological illiteracy and ensuring ecological sustainability takes the form of the deep map at the centre of *PrairyErth*'s literary geography (italics in original, 494). Like Jackson, it also argues for the acquisition of expert local knowledge through close topoanalysis of the soil, earth, and, culture, but then proceeds to use it creatively to re-trope and -imagine it in an aboriginal dreamtime cartography. Heat-Moon's hope is that such neo-primitivist grousing may lead to a *'sacred understanding'* of place deriving from both being and *'bearing witness'* (615). In the words that he cites from Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* (1983), the author calls for an *'earthy spirituality'* which reflects the close proximity between *'religious activity and the acts of everyday'* in Native American and other aboriginal traditions (605, italics in original). From this eco-aesthetic perspective, we can see how the *'deep leguminous roots'* and the *'webbed complexity'* of lead plant not only carry an important ecological message – they fix nitrogen in the soil and indicate a prairie biome in balance – they also serve as a key

rhizomatic trope of a literary imagination that strives to ‘take advantage of the mysteries of community and tribe and our Paleolithic longings’ (504).

It is finally in this cultural context that Heat-Moon’s dreamtime mapping of Chase County marks an intervention in an ongoing territorial dispute that is not merely literary or aesthetic but also, as I have tried to show in this chapter, political and ideological in scope. The hybrid ecological element of the deep map is part of an argument for ethical and sustainable inhabitation against the backdrop of ‘the continuing onslaught’ of an ingrained cultural progressivism, which, according to the author, is really regressive (83). Read in this way, the ecologism of the deep map, the ethics of the aesthetic, thus helps the reader understand that the narrative of *PrairyErth* constitutes a reverse recovery narrative. Yet the fact the it is written as a critical response to the progressive meta-narrative is indicative of the pervasiveness, persistence, and power of this overarching national story; not just to the production of the type of literary geographies discussed here but also to how the Plains region continues to be understood, represented and positioned in a wider cultural discourse on America as space and place. As one Pennsylvanian college student tells the author, ‘*I can’t believe this country. I can’t believe it’s still like this. I mean, it’s so Americana*’ (18, italics in original).

## Conclusion: 'Posting' the Plains – beyond frontier, region, and nation

To frame this study while also looking at what lies beyond, I want to suggest that the literary geographies studied here delineate a shift in how the prairies have been understood and represented as both space and place. The direction of the shift is from a narrow conception of region and nation as bounded and unified towards a post-regional and -national point of view that registers movements below, across, and beyond established boundaries. My readings have shown that a regional geography which served as a focal point in the formation of national American and Canadian frontier narratives was always already post-frontier in significant ways. The clearest manifestation of this we find in texts which, in the act of unearthing local particulars, enact the multiple connections between intercultural, transnational, and -continental forces and movements that operate at once below and above the levels of region and nation.

With its narrative of spatial recovery and fall, and its articulation of a hope of the re-recovery of progressive and pastoral pioneer values, *O Pioneers!* aligns itself closely with a culturally prominent frontier discourse surrounding the Midwest. Choosing a local setting, Cather's novel tells a story of how space becomes place that displays several characteristics commonly associated with grand narratives of empire and history. Among the key ones are the ideologically charged gaze of landscape and grid, space understood in binary terms as either wilderness or landscape, and time as linear and teleological. Not only do these representational practices obscure salient elements of the pre-settlement landscape and the settlement process itself, they also make a significant contribution to a dominant discourse on America as nation and empire.



One sign of the latter is the acutely felt influence of Cather's prairie landscapes on the formation of regional and national literary histories and canons. Previously, I mentioned that Susan Rosowski identifies in Cather's prairie novels 'an essential relationship between geography and literature' and that Robert Thacker considers her 'the most subtle artist yet to record' 'the vast essence of the prairie landscape'.<sup>1</sup> Complementing these claims, Laura Winters asserts in her study of landscape and exile in Cather's fiction that she 'describes the way in which places allow people to understand their authentic selves.'<sup>2</sup> According to Winters, 'Cather's characters must transform mundane [...] spaces into sacred places' to overcome a condition of exile. Tellingly, in the process of doing so, 'order is created from chaos; the history of the earth and the history of the individual merge and are reconciled. These sacred places bring peace: an aura of resolution and rightness pervades the very air.'<sup>3</sup>

Against these claims of essentialism and authenticity by 'traditionalist Catherians', Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin make the argument that they effectively reproduce 'cultural myths that have come to stand for historical truth – a strain of myth resistant to alternative criticism because of its quintessential "Americanness."<sup>4</sup> My reading of *O Pioneers!* and its critical reception lends support to Frus and Corkin's argument in that it demonstrates how Cather's literary landscapes have both contributed to and been enlisted in the formation of narrow regionalist and nationalist discourses, a key product of which is a mythic and mythicising sense of place that seeks closure, fixity, and authenticity.

This may seem surprising considering the presence of trans-cultural and – national elements in the prairie novels' depiction of place. In the case of *O Pioneers!*, Bohemian, French, and Scandinavian settlers do after all live side by side and reproduce the landscapes of Lombardy and central France on the barren Plains. In this

regard, Cather's Midwest is not homogenously or essentially American, but rather American with a strong European inflection. It encompasses what Elisabeth Ammons has identified as Cather's 'romance of empire' within the striating lines of landscape and grid.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, the transformation of wilderness into landscape garden embodies the place-making practices and values of a white, Euro-American agricultural and artistic tradition to the exclusion of practices and values that are geographically, ethnically, and ecologically other. As we saw in Diane Dufva Quantic's study of Plains fiction, *The Nature of the Place*, the salient myths of this tradition have achieved a hegemonic cultural status that renders them immune to deconstruction or displacement: 'the myths are embedded firmly enough in our national consciousness that writers can satirize and parody them with confidence: the myths are inverted, not transformed.'<sup>6</sup>

Against this mode of representing region and nation, Robert Kroetsch's post-structuralist field work posits a counter narrative. It unearths the particulars – stone hammers, ledgers, and seed catalogues – of a local archive invisible from centrist imperial and national vantage points. In doing so, his long poems document a series of intercultural and transnational movements and exchanges that take place below, across, and beyond the levels of region and nation. Moreover, by mapping these, Kroetsch's literary geography provides illuminating lessons in the construction of spatial history with implications for our sense of place. One of his salient findings is that the story of imperial place-making was always already hybrid, syncretic, and of undecideable origins, thus interrupting and barring any return to 'ethnically closed and centered origin histories.'<sup>7</sup>

It is for the same reason that Kroetsch's literary geography is not straightforwardly anti-colonial or -imperial along the binary topologies of centre-

periphery, then-now, and domination-resistance. Instead, the dialogic and palimpsest genealogy that his field notes uncover may serve as a model of the transverse relations of power that criss-cross the spheres of the local and global (and all locations in between) in the case of a settler region like the Plains. As heartland and periphery, the prairie West has both contributed to and been marginalised by a modern story of empire and nation building. But even so, as *Field Notes* demonstrates, it is nonetheless possible to deconstruct this story from within as a means to not only resisting but also making productive its own marginality and absences. In the case of Kroetsch's long poems, it is in the unceasing interplay and intercourse of peoples, places, events, and ideas that the Plains become 'a multiply inflected terrain whose identity is always in flux'.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the names prairie, Plains and Canadian are not abandoned or displaced. Rather their valence changes as they are de-territorialized in negative and paradoxical terms of, for example, unity as disunity and location as dislocation. The fragmented and episodic form of the field poems is indicative of a history of place that unfolds as a non-linear series of erasures/inscriptions, cover-ups/unveilings, removals/emplacements, sales/purchases of, for example, ice, rock, land, Indians, settlers, and an 'old' world into a 'new' one and back again. This 'folding' history of space and place is furthermore truncated by gaps, absences, and not knowing. Hence we may say that in the face of the agrarian garden view, Kroetsch's genealogical inquiry reflects a desire to unknow the ways people have been taught to see and inhabit the prairies. The poems do so by dismantling the old meta-narratives of national and regional consensus and unity – what Krista Comer denotes 'official National Symbolic' – and asking writer and reader to look again and anew.<sup>9</sup>

When he describes the landscape of Chase County, Kansas as '[i]n transit and translation', Heat-Moon signals that he is one American writer intent on pursuing a decentring route similar to the one taken by the Canadian Kroetsch (PE, 103). His deep map of a limited locale does not uncover a neatly enclosed place but one formed by the 'transgressing, regressing, transgressing' forces of nature (geology, water, grass, wind) and culture (grid, power lines, pipelines) (PE, 158). Far from resorting solely to geographic determinism, *PrairyErth* remains acutely aware of the social, political, and economic forces that have shaped the place and which defy the borders of region and nation in any narrowly defined sense. From his position of roving, local emplacement, Heat-Moon arrives at a global outlook:

This road is not an isolated parallel but a piece of the conflux of the greater grid, a planetary circumspection to read: far in front of me right now a Korean must be walking toward his noon meal, and behind me in the dawn an Athenian coming from a tryst, and along this line someone lies sleeping in Maryland. (PE, 366)

At times, his global geographic imaginary borders perilously close on the 'not quite' supernatural cosmic realm of an indigenous 'dreamtime cartography'. In doing so, it paradoxically runs the risk of recoiling into a realm that is potentially as mystifying as the one it is meant to demystify. However, as the 'not quite' indicates, Heat-Moon's hybrid ecological and indigenous regionalism flirts with the supernatural not so much to root place in an essentialist or meta-physical sense. Rather his dreamtime cartography becomes a conceptual means of giving a degree of coherence to the 'infinite lines' of a deep landscape that radiates 'in an indefinite number of directions'

(PE, 246). It serves, in other words, a pragmatic purpose intended to create a sense of placial belonging in the face of the place-erasing powers of the cartographic grid; an emblem of abstract, rational Enlightenment mapping and a culturally-dominant narrative of progress, which in Heat-Moon's analysis is regressive and alienating. The 'infinite lines' of his rhizomatic and palimpsest 'deep landscape' thus change the valence of the word America much in the way that Kroetsch deconstructs the name Canada. They remind writer and reader that 'there are 140 ways to spell Kansas' and, in doing so, address 'shadows in me, loomings about threats to America that are alive here too' (PE, 246, 10).

We can see then how *Field Notes* and *PrairieErth* are both examples of what Krista Comer describes as a post-1970s assault on the 'official National Symbolic' and a consensus seeking North 'American mind', which, when applied to regioning comes at significant costs.<sup>10</sup> Firmly grounded in their respective American and Canadian cultural landscapes, Kroetsch and Heat-Moon dispute and displace narrow regional and national framings of the Plains from geological, geo-political, ecological, vernacular, and indigenous perspectives. Moreover, the post-regional and -national elements that they uncover have obvious social and political implications for issues of identity, inhabitation, belonging, and affect. Put differently, the politics of their aesthetics links their literary geographies to a wider cultural discourse on prairie space and place.

Closely related to the argument of the Plains as 'post' region, nation, and frontier is the question of canon formation. From the perspective of space and place, I want to suggest that the elevation of Cather's prairie novels into a contemporary canon of Great Plains and American literature is problematic. The type of canon I have in mind has been defined by Elizabeth Ammons as 'a multiethnic, multiracial

body of texts that exist in relationship to each other not hierarchically and Eurocentrically but laterally and pluralistically.’<sup>11</sup> One of the main causes for concern is, as I explained above, a tendency to reify, root, and render authentic in the literary landscapes themselves as well as in the critical industry surrounding Cather’s texts. Notions of the Plains as somehow quintessentially American or Midwestern evoke a homogenous, enclosed, and fixed place that sits uneasily alongside the post-regional and –national geographies of Kroetsch and Heat-Moon. *PrairieEarth*’s deep map reveals, for instance, how Indian, Hispanic, black, Asian, and European elements and interests have intersected, collaborated, and fought for control over what is now Chase County, Kansas. As a result, a locale that is popularly perceived as either ‘barren, desolate, monotonous, a land of more nothing than almost any other place you might name’ or as unbelievably ‘*Americana*’ is shown to have a multiethnic and -racial past (PE, 10, 18).

In addition, the inter- and trans-cultural encounters unearthed by Heat-Moon also remind us that a multicultural canon of the many does not simply imply diversity and a celebration of difference. It must also account for territorial conflicts, disputes, and power struggles. As Elizabeth Ammons points out, cultures ‘do not exist in a vacuum’ but ‘within power relations that are socially determined and politically invested, and they are therefore both constituted by and they themselves participate in the constituting *of* the political environment in which all of us write, read, interpret, and teach.’<sup>12</sup> As I have tried to show throughout this study, one way of getting critical purchase on the social and political investedness of Plains literature is by adopting a geographical perspective. It is, for example, by paying close attention to spatialising tropes such as wilderness, landscape, and grid that signs of the historical struggle for settlement become apparent beneath the surface of ‘the happy worlds of *O Pioneers!*,

*The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*’.<sup>13</sup> In relation to a multicultural canon, these signs of ethnic, territorial, and environmental conflict and hierarchy contradict claims that Cather’s prairie landscapes are characterised by ‘diversity and pluralism’ and represent ‘less a clash than a cross fertilization of the Nations of the West.’<sup>14</sup>

What these observations on canon and culture point to, then, is a need to interrogate and move beyond the established boundaries of a predominantly white Euro-American agrarian canon. They indicate that a fissuring of existing canon boundaries will enable us to uncover literary geographies and criticism that reflect a Plains experience that is not unduly restricted by narrow definitions of region and nation, which have commonly fostered repressive forms of socio-political unity and consensus. It was partly to pursue this end that I chose to juxtapose contradicting literary geographies for this study. Having done so, I hope to have set out a multi-storied, polyvocal, and -valent Plains place whose contesting voices, actors, and forces counter attempts at defining the region in terms of enclosure, fixity, homogeneity, essentialism, and authenticity. What emerge instead are events, forces, and movements that operate below, across, and above as well as before and after, the borders of frontier, region, and nation. It is by explicating these that it becomes possible to illuminate the complex interrelations that exist between the personal (bodies, subjectivities), local, regional, national, international, transcontinental, and global nodal points of space and place.

A perspective that looks beyond region, nation, and frontier thus reminds us of the non-foundational nature of space and place. Neither is defined by or traceable to essential, inherent, or immutable characteristics or categories. Realising this may help us avoid approaching regionalism as ‘the nostalgia for a past state’ which guarantees ‘the certainty of the survival of that past’ in the form of a place ‘we can bring back,

ideally, in our understandable present as a moral prescription.’<sup>15</sup> More usefully, a post-regional perspective allows us to view place and space as the products of and producers of complex cultural relations that are ‘socially determined and politically invested’. Among the salient cultural relations that post-regional and -national lines of inquiry identify and probe into are historical as well as contemporary aspects of space and place pertaining to ethnicity, race, gender, ecology, geo-politics, empire, colonialism, and economics. Many of these aspects have too often gone unnoticed, been obscured, or insufficiently dealt with in narratives of narrow(ing) regionalism and nationalism. Given the central grasslands’ recent history of settlement, it is perhaps not surprising that its literary canon has been defined in the main by a white Euro-American agrarian culture. But such an example of cultural dominance only serves to further underline the need for a multi-cultural canon that is alert to dialogics, interconnectivity, and nonlinearity as these are qualities that can prevent us from seeing region as ‘an indestructible entity that transcends and survives history to remain everlastingly the same.’<sup>16</sup> Regions may, as Hsuan L. Hsu has recently argued, ‘administer or fix social and economic relations in a given area, but they are themselves produced or transformed in relation to – and often in the service of – larger dominant spaces.’<sup>17</sup>

As a possible starting point for conceiving of a post-regional canon of Plains literature, one could point to *A Great Plains Reader* (2003). In this anthology excerpts from texts by Willa Cather, Ole Rølvaag, Hamlin Garland, Wallace Stegner, Robert Kroetsch, Zitkala-Za, Jo Harjo, Louise Erdrich, Dan O’Brien, Ron Hanson, William Least Heat-Moon, Ian Frazier and many others sit side by side. Because of its lateral, paratactic orientation, the anthology opens up for comparative readings of important dimensions of prairie place-making pertaining to ethnicity, race, gender, nationality,



ecology, economics, empire and colonialism. This offers hope, finally, that the ‘webbed complexity’ of the root systems of prairie grasses may after all provide us with a metaphor capable of guiding our reading of the region’s literature beyond the familiar and easily recognisable sign posts of region, nation, and frontier (PE, 237).

## Appendix



Fig. 1. John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872.



Fig. 2. Sallie Cover, *Homestead of Ellsworth L. Ball*, circa 1880-90.





Fig. 3. Frances Palmer, *Across the Continent* 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', 1868.

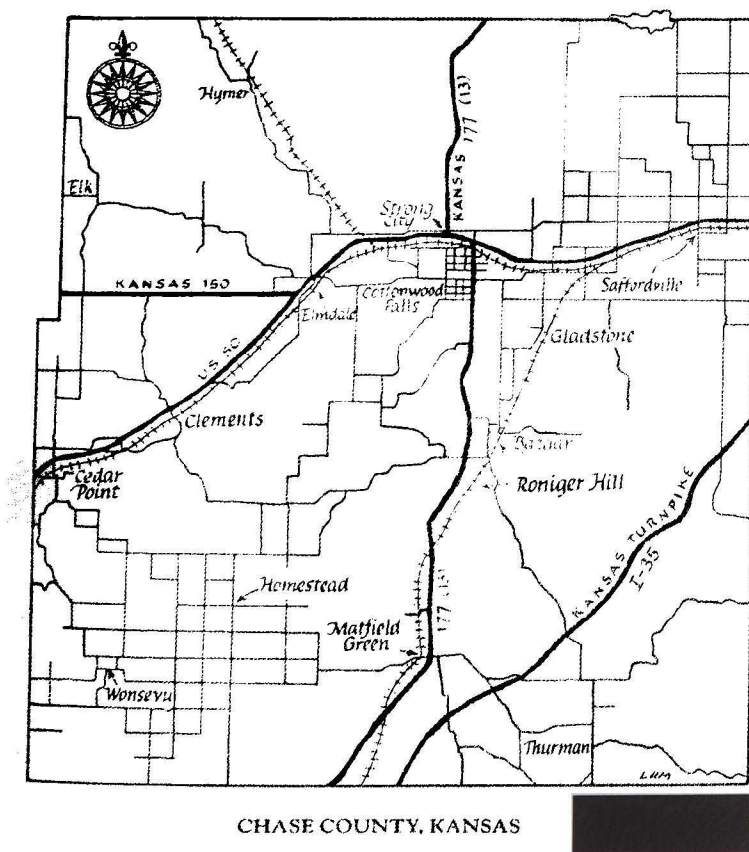


Fig. 4. William Least Heat-Moon, 'Chase County, Kansas', *PrairieErth*, 1991.

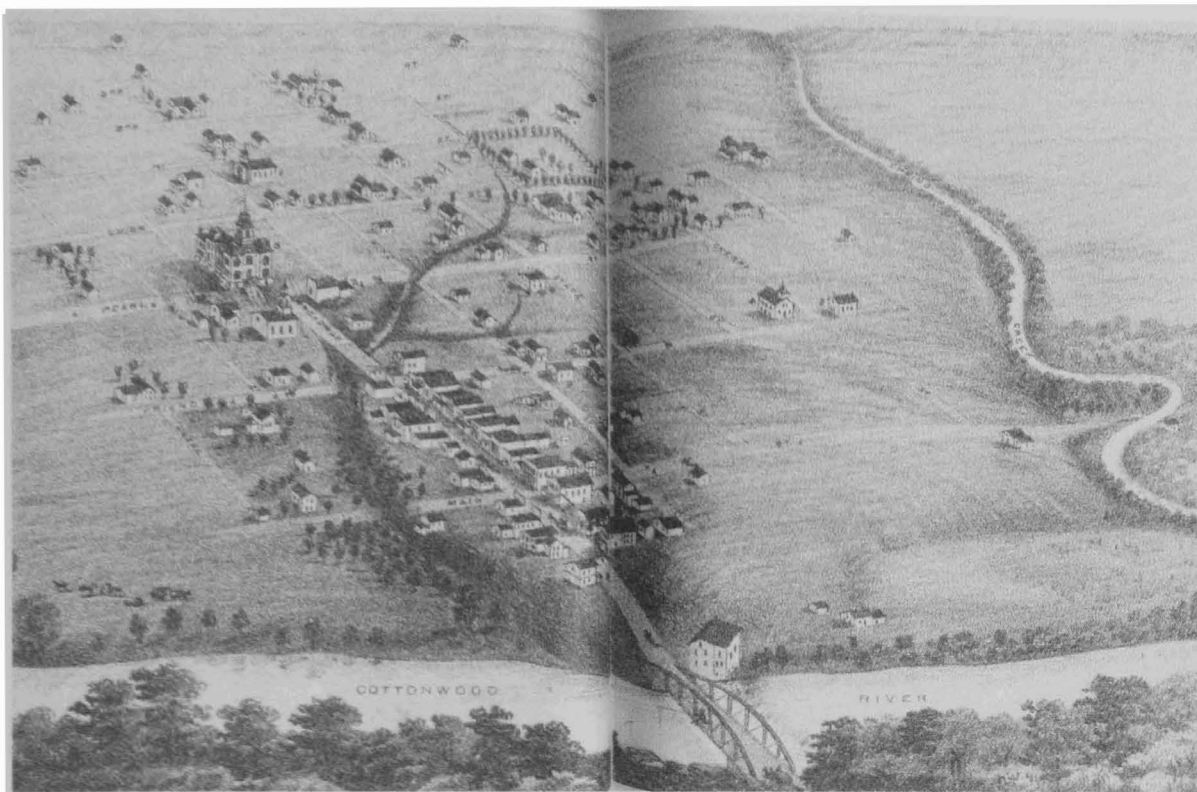


Fig. 5. D. D. Morse, 'Cottonwood Falls, Kansas'. Reproduced in *PrairyErth*, 50-51.



MAJOR WATERSHEDS OF CHASE COUNTY

Fig. 6. William Least Heat-Moon, 'Major Watersheds of Chase County', *PrairyErth*, 1991.

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## Notes

### 'Notes to Introduction'

<sup>1</sup> The word 'geografictione' was coined by Albertan writer Aritha van Herk to describe her textual hybrid *Places Far From Ellesmere*, which is shaped like the geography of the island in the Arctic Archipelago that the title refers to. In addition, the text is also a 'fiction of geography' that blurs the line between autobiography, geography, and history through a series of cartographical gestures. Finally, because it meta-narratively maps these gestures, the text may also be described as a 'geography of fiction' that registers how fictions of place, geography, and self are invented. For a detailed discussion of these geographical aspects of the text, see 'An Interview with Aritha van Herk', May 15, 1994, Trier, Germany at [http://www.arithavanherk.de/texts/avh\\_interview.pdf](http://www.arithavanherk.de/texts/avh_interview.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 136.

<sup>4</sup> This argument is, as we shall see, put forward by Robert Thacker in *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 20. Casey also explains the obscuration of place with reference to temporocentrism: 'Place, reduced to locations between which movements of physical bodies occur, vanished from view almost altogether in the era of temporocentrism (i.e. a belief in the hegemony of time) that has dominated the last two hundred years of philosophy in the wake of Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Darwin, Bergson, and William James' (x).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 340, 341.

<sup>9</sup> The term dialogics as it is used in this study is informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and the cluster of related notions such as architectonics, polyphony, and the chronotope that he deploys to examine the histo-poetic relations and situatedness of individual texts, genres, and literature in works such as *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). In contrast to monologism's 'finished-off, generalized category that is given and determined' and which 'closes down the represented world and represented persons', dialogism refers to the intersections at which historical actors and voices come into contact, collaboration, and conflict as they address questions of, for example, regionality, nationality, ethnicity, economics, and the environment (Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 162 & *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 203). A central claim made on behalf of the situated historical poetics of Bakhtinian dialogism is that it enables us to tease out elements that turn monoglossic narratives of a predominantly white, progressive, and agrarian Midwest into a polyglossic and -valent middle ground where issues of voice, representation, and power can be (re-)negotiated. Like another study drawing on Bakhtinian ideas, Susan Friedmann's *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounters*, this thesis also proposes 'a dialogic, spatial model of narrative to displace the exclusivity of developmental, temporal models that characterize some narrative theory' (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998, 150). Instead, it sets out to 'examine the dialogic of space and time, location and development, encounter and desire' as they drive narratives of the Plains forward (*Mappings*, 150).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 337.

### 'Notes to Chapter 1'

<sup>1</sup> Diane Dufva Quantic, *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> In her article 'Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady*', Cather scholar Susan J. Rosowski describes the novels as 'a brilliant trilogy of place'. Rosowski in *Geography and Literature. A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Quantic, op. cit., xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 7.



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- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Frederick Grove, *Fruits of the Earth* (Toronto: New Canadian Library, 1989), 20.
- <sup>7</sup> Casey, op. cit., 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Ole Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 47.
- <sup>9</sup> Casey, op.cit., 9.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>11</sup> Carolyn Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative,' in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 133 & 137.
- <sup>12</sup> Grove, *Fruits of the Earth*, 20.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 14-5.
- <sup>14</sup> Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), 32 & 33.
- <sup>15</sup> Merchant, op.cit., 137.
- <sup>16</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Crom & Helm, 1984), 177.
- <sup>17</sup> John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 1982), 87, 104, 107.
- <sup>18</sup> Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: London: W.W. Norton and Co, 1987), 77.
- <sup>19</sup> Stilgoe, op. cit., 103.
- <sup>20</sup> Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 303.
- <sup>21</sup> See for example, Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* and Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
- <sup>22</sup> Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden', 149.
- <sup>23</sup> L. B. Alberti, *On painting* (New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 1966).
- <sup>24</sup> Denis Cosgrove, 'Prospect, Perspective, and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,' in *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Inquiry*, ed. Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory (London: Arnold, 1997), 327
- <sup>25</sup> Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 21.
- <sup>26</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: Harmondsworth, 1956), 21.
- <sup>27</sup> Cosgrove, 'Prospect, Perspective, and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea', 325.
- <sup>28</sup> Frances Palmer, *Across the Continent: 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way'* (New York: Currier & Ives, 1868).
- <sup>29</sup> Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 179.
- <sup>30</sup> Wolfgang Born, *American Landscape Painting: an Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 44.
- <sup>31</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 173.
- <sup>32</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 41 & 286.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 96-97.
- <sup>34</sup> Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 162.
- <sup>35</sup> Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America*, 106.
- <sup>36</sup> Cosgrove, op. cit., 162.
- <sup>37</sup> Annette Kolodny, *Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), ix.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 5-6.
- <sup>39</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 18.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 19.
- <sup>41</sup> John Wiley, *Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007), 123.
- <sup>42</sup> Robert Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 58.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 159.
- <sup>44</sup> Prominent historians such as William Appleman Williams and Howard Zinn trace American imperialism back to the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the removal of Native Americans in the last decades of the eighteenth and first decades of the nineteenth century. See for example, Williams' *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961) and *The Roots of the Modern American Empire* (New York: Random House, 1969), or Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire* (London: Metropolitan Books, 2008).
- <sup>45</sup> Nicholas Biddle's 1814 version of the Lewis and Clark journals marks an early but significant contribution to the construction of the westward advance as a 'romantic adventure' in the popular

imagination. See Gary E. Moulton's introduction to volume two of *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. Gary E. Moulton and Thomas Dunlay (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

<sup>46</sup> Howard R. Lamar, 'The Unsettling of the American West: The Mobility of Defeat,' in *Crossing Frontiers. Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1979), 146.

<sup>47</sup> Donald Meinig, *The shaping of America: a geographical perspective on 500 years of history Vol. 2: Continental America 1800-1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 533.

<sup>48</sup> J. Hector St John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from An American Farmer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 (1782)), 44; Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' in *Report of the American Historical Association for 1893* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1894), 199-227.

<sup>49</sup> Walt Whitman, *Prose Works Vol. 1* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 219.

<sup>50</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), x-xi.

<sup>51</sup> Despite seeking authority in 'scientific demonstration', the historiographical projects of Turner and Roosevelt conform precisely, according to Richard Slotkin, 'to the function we have ascribed to mythic narrative in modern culture: they deploy a language of traditional ideological symbols and narrative structures as a means to understanding a social/political crisis.' (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 30, 32).

<sup>52</sup> Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>53</sup> Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 153.

<sup>55</sup> Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 323, 324.

<sup>57</sup> In *Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising*, Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson point out that '[f]or nearly a century, this mythic imagery of small-town and rural America as the heartland has constituted the locus of American moral virtue in advertising, and is often utilized to signify American pride.' (New York: Guildford Press, 1996), 230.

<sup>58</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>59</sup> Suzanne Stewart, 'Writing lines on the land: Recent poems on rural life,' *Essays on Canadian Writing* 73 (Fall 2001): 174.

<sup>60</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Dakota. A Spiritual Geography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 45, 46, 64.

<sup>61</sup> Frank Norris, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 151-152.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas Unger, *Leaving the Land* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 276-77.

<sup>63</sup> Ron Hanson, *Nebraska Stories* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), 40.

<sup>64</sup> Quantic, *The Nature of the Place*, 149.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>66</sup> In her reading of van Herk's *No Fixed Address* and *Places far from Ellsmere*, Marlene Goldman suggests that their tropical, structural, and thematic 'gesture toward deterritorialisation, read by some critics as genrelessness, resembles an ideologically subversive stance which Gilles Deleuz and Felix Guattari refer to as "nomadology."' Marlene Goldman, 'Earth-quaking the Kingdom of the Male Virgin. A Deleuzian Analysis of Aritha van Herk's "No Fixed Address" and "Places Far From Ellsmere,"' *Canadian Literature* 137 (Summer 1993): 22.

<sup>67</sup> However, in the interest of providing a balanced account, it should be noted that some of the omissions in *The Nature of the Place* have been addressed in the most recent literary history of the prairies, *A Great Plains Reader*, ed. Diane D. Quantic and P. Jane Hafen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). This anthology includes a wider selection of excerpts in terms of ethnicity, gender, history, politics, and geography.

<sup>68</sup> Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden', 156.

<sup>69</sup> Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 115.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>71</sup> Merchant, *op. cit.*, 156.

<sup>72</sup> Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 21-22. In the essay 'Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy', Kroetsch argues that Canada does not have a shared story or meta-narrative comparable to the American recovery narrative: 'to make a long story disunited, let me assert here that I'm suggesting that Canadians cannot agree on what their meta-narrative is. I am also suggesting that, in some perverse way, this very falling-apart of our story is what holds our story together.'

<sup>73</sup> The rhizome is a key analytical figure in my reading of contemporary literary geographies of the Great Plains. Developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the monumental second volume of their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project (1972-1980), *A Thousand Plateaus* (trans. Brian Massumi, London: The Athlone Press, 1988), it is a philosophical figure of thought that enables analysis of a plethora of topics in their concrete historical and material contexts. In contrast to arborescent knowledge structures such as Noam Chomsky's grammatical trees and the cartographical grid, the rhizome is a botanical 'radicle-system' that 'connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states' (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 5 & 21). Whereas arborescent root trees/books map along linear, progressive lines and fixed coordinates to produce hierarchical taxonomies, the rhizome allows for multiple entry and exit points as well as non-hierarchical horizontal and trans-species conductivity. Its ideal is, we are told, 'to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority [...], on a single page, the same sheet: lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations' (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 9). In its attempt to do so, the 'antigenealogy' that is *A Thousand Plateaus* begins to account for the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of 'semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows' as they relate, in the context of this study, to the production of prairie space and place (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 22-3). By paying particular attention to questions of concrete emplacement and landscape flows, the rhizome uncovers nomadic movements that decentre and challenge commonplace myths of the Midwest as, for example, agrarian heartland or cultural wasteland. The best example of an extended rhizomatic reading of western American literature, art, and culture is Neil Campbell's *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> Merchant, op. cit., 133.

<sup>75</sup> One prominent example would be Theodore Roosevelt's elaboration of Turner's frontier thesis in *The Winning of the West* (New York: Putnam, 1889-1896). As Richard Slotkin has demonstrated, Roosevelt argues for 'the development of an American "racial" character' whose ethnogenesis is said to originate in the British Isles with the interbreeding of Germanic tribes such as Saxons, Frisians, Norse, and Danes.' (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 42 & 45) Moreover, in foregrounding a representation of Western cowboys as white, rugged and self-reliant individuals, Roosevelt relegates the historical contribution of black cowboys to the realm of obscurity. Similarly, the ideologically motivated fronting of the story of agrarian settlement means that 'mines, towns, cities, railroads, territorial government, and the institutions of commerce and finance never found much of a home in his [Turner's frontier] model.' (Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 21).

<sup>76</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 30.

<sup>77</sup> Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 311-12.

<sup>78</sup> Drawing on a recent article by Randall Roorda, Susan Maher argues that because of their 'ambitious...self-reflexive' character and innovative narrative architecture, the deep mappings of place in texts such as Heat-Moon's *PrairieErth*, John Janovy's *A Keith County Journal*, and Dan Gayton's *Wheatgrass Mechanism* are part of an 'incipient genre of environmental literature'. Susan Maher, 'Deep Mapping the Biome' *Great Plains Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 7. Randall Roorda, 'Deep Maps in Eco-literature,' *Michigan Quarterly Review* 40, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>79</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 10.

<sup>80</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, 1982), 130-1.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> My use of the homonyms roots and routes is informed by James Clifford's migratory theory as it is unfolded in his anthropological study *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, in particular the chapter 'Traveling Cultures' (Harvard University Press, 1997) and Paul Gilroy's study of hybridity in black Atlantic culture, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). In 'Traveling Cultures', Clifford argues that studies of cultural roots and traditions must also take into account the effect that traffic along intercultural routes has on them. Gilroy, in his study, traces the flows, exchanges, and circulations between African, African-American, and European cultures. In doing so, notions of cultural and placial identity as originary, essential, unified, or fixed are called into question. In their place the flux of historical routes brings 'to visibility those aspects of cultural and individual identity that the conventional emphasis on home or "dwelling" has largely suppressed' (Friedmann, *Mappings*, 152). An important consequence of bringing to the fore questions of travel, migration, displacement, and translation is that we can see how 'narratives about identity and



the identity of narrative itself involve an underlying dialogic negotiation between assertion of difference (roots) and acceptance of hybridity produced through travel in time and space (routes).’ Friedmann, *Mappings*, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Maher, ‘Deep Mapping the Biome’: 13.

<sup>85</sup> The term negative capability as it applies to my discussion of Robert Kroetsch and William Least Heat-Moon’s texts still carries an element of what John Keats defined as man’s capability ‘of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ in his letter to George and Thomas Keats dated Sunday, 22 December 1817 (Duncan Wu, *Romanticism: an anthology* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 1351). However, far from leading to Romantic meditations on or cringing before the mystery of being, a negative capability as it is practiced by Kroetsch and Heat-Moon is strategic and pragmatic as well as creative. With reference to deconstructivist and post-structuralist thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, it undertakes, in the words of Bill Spanos, a ‘decentring and dis-closure’ of logocentric Western epistemes that conceive of and represent knowledge as positive, binary, totalising, and progressively accumulating (William V. Spanos, ‘Charles Olson and negative capability: a phenomenological interpretation,’ *Contemporary Literature* 21, 38-80. (1980): 42). As Robert Kroetsch explains in a conversation with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, a negative capability refers to ‘in a word of Beckett, the unknowable: deliberately staying out of the knowable, being interested in what one doesn’t know’ (Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, 1982), 130-1). In Kroetsch’s prairie field notes and Heat-Moon’s deep map, this involves the identification of gaps, silences, absences, and a lack of knowledge that unsettle commonplace regional representations and narratives and make space for creative and critical re-imagining and re-imaging that attempt to live with rather than eliminate uncertainty: ‘Instead of a fear of myth as closure, and as entrapment, myth can become generative again. But it must be decentered’ (ibid. 131).

<sup>86</sup> Richard Manning, *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* (New York: Penguin, Viking, 1995), 55.

<sup>87</sup> Willa Cather, ‘Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,’ *The Nation* 37 (1923): 238.

<sup>88</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 261.

<sup>89</sup> Guy Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 2; ‘Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch,’ *Arts Manitoba* 1, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1977): 32.

<sup>90</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounters* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 151-152.

<sup>91</sup> David Stouck, ‘Willa Cather and the Russians,’ *Cather Studies* 1, no. 14 (1990): 14.

<sup>92</sup> Rosowski, ‘Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady*’, 83.

<sup>93</sup> Bernice Slote, ‘A Gathering of Nations,’ in *The Art of Willa Cather*, ed. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 11.

<sup>94</sup> Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, 9 & 2.

<sup>95</sup> The term Eco-Indian as used here refers to Shepard Krech’s recent study, *The Ecological Indian* in which he rebuts the notion of Native Americans as de-historicised, green, sustainable, and noble by documenting instances of ecological degradation by Plains tribes. Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

<sup>96</sup> Maher, ‘Deep Mapping the Biome’: 14.

<sup>97</sup> Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 297.

<sup>98</sup> Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 104.

<sup>99</sup> Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 54.

## ‘Notes to Chapter 2’

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin, ‘Cather Criticism and the American Canon,’ *College English* 59, no. 2 (Feb. 1997): 206.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Rosowski, ‘Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady*,’ in *Geography and Literature. A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Merchant, ‘Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative,’ in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 153.

<sup>4</sup> The Cather Foundation website invites visitors to ‘Enter the 1880s in Historic Red Cloud, Nebraska [...] Willa Cather’s Window to the World’, <http://www.willacather.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Frus and Corkin, op. cit., 208.

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<sup>6</sup> Guy Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 46.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, 'Cather and the New Canon: "The Old Beauty" and the Issue of Empire,' *Cather Studies* 3 (1996): 259 & 261.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Fischer, 'Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism,' *Mosaic* 23, no. 1 (1990): 32.

<sup>9</sup> John C. Hudson, 'Towns of the Western Railroads,' *Great Plains Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 41.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Robert Thacker's *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1989) and Diane Dufva Qunatic's *The Nature of the Place* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Paul Prucha, *The Indians in American Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Merchant's comment on the symbolic gendering of American land may also be said to apply to cultural place-making on the Plains: 'These meanings of nature as female and agency as male are encoded as symbols and myths into American lands as having the potential for development, but needing the male hero, Adam. Such symbols are not essences, because they do not represent characteristics necessary or essential to being female or male. Rather, they are historically constructed meanings deriving from the origin stories of European settlers and European cultural and economic practices transported to and developed in the American New World. That they may appear to be essences is a result of their historical construction in Western history, not the immutable characteristics.' Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden', 137.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Merchant explains that '[m]odern Europeans added two components to the Christian recovery project – mechanistic science and laissez-faire capitalism – to create a grand master narrative of Enlightenment.' Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden', 136.

For a discussion of the Virgilian influence on the plot of *O Pioneers!*, see chapter four, 'O Pioneers! Willa Cather's New World Pastoral', of Susan J. Rosowski's *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> On the effect of the drought and economic downturn in 1893-1897 on Nebraska, Cather wrote in 1923: 'These years of trial, as everyone now realizes, had a salutary effect upon the new State. They winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents who are ever seeking a land where a man does not live by the sweat of his brow. The slack farmer moved on. Superfluous banks failed, and money lenders who drove hard bargains with desperate men came to grief. The strongest stock survived, and within ten years those who had weathered the storm came into their reward.' Willa Cather, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,' *The Nation* 117, (5 September 1923): 238.

<sup>20</sup> Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden', 134.

<sup>21</sup> On Alexandra as a conflation 'of two types of settler: the canny speculator and the idealised pioneer farmer', Guy Reynolds comments that '[t]he conflation is not easily achieved; the prose sometimes shows the tension between the two types rather than their marriage. Presenting Alexandra as a speculator and an idealised pioneer led Cather into convoluted, if not illogical, characterisation.' Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> In a cultural context, *O Pioneers!*'s recovery narrative is unusual in that it has a woman act out a myth of domestication that traditionally was presented as a masculine enterprise, for example as conquest of virgin space. However, if we take into account Alexandra's masculine attributes and actions, it may be suggested that we are not so much witnessing a feminist challenge to a gendered appropriation of the frontier mythos, which challenges certain ideological aspects of masculine recovery narratives such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt's frontier theses. Thus, in some ways, Alexandra's composite character pre-figures Cather's opposition to the male-dominated construction of an American canon during the 1920s with reference commonly to D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*.

<sup>23</sup> Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1999), 62.

<sup>24</sup> Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous*, 53.

- <sup>25</sup> This period includes the years 1893-97, which according to Cather were marred 'by a succession of crop failures and by the financial depression which spread over the whole country at that time'. Cather, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle', 238.
- <sup>26</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 7.
- <sup>27</sup> Susan Rosowski has noted a strong thematic correspondence between 'Neighboring Fields' and Virgil's fourth eclogue, 'The Golden Age Returns', in particular the way in which they represent nature as perfectly harmonious and bountiful. *The Voyage Perilous*, 47.
- <sup>28</sup> Joseph R. Ugo, 'The Cather thesis: the American empire of migration,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. Marilee Lindemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 36.
- <sup>29</sup> For a study of classicism and romanticism in Cather's Plains novels, see chapter four of Susan J. Rosowski's *The Voyage Perilous*.
- <sup>30</sup> See Polly. P. Duryea, *Paintings and Drawings in Willa Cather's Prose: A Catalogue Raisonné*, PhD Dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, May 1993, <http://cather.unl.edu/scholarship/references/duryea.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> Willa Cather, 'On the Art of Fiction,' in *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 103.
- <sup>32</sup> Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 8.
- <sup>33</sup> For further discussion of these aspects of *The Sower* see Robert Herbert, *Jean Francois-Millet* (London: Arts Council of Britain, 1976), 78-80.
- <sup>34</sup> As Michel de Certeau reminds us, this visual mode of mastering the spaces around us has been influential in Western arts for centuries: 'Medieval or Renaissance painters represented the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed. This fiction already made the medieval spectator into a celestial eye. It created gods. Have things changed since technical procedures have organized an "all-seeing power"? The totalising eye imagined by the painters of earlier times lives on in our achievements [...] to construct the fiction that creates readers'. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.
- <sup>35</sup> This way of seeing was popularised through the thousands of bird's-eye-view prints of prairie towns that were put on private and public display in the late nineteenth hundreds. For a representative sample see for example <http://www.historicmapworks.com>.
- <sup>36</sup> Cather, 'On the Art of Fiction,' in *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*, 104.
- <sup>37</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 286.
- <sup>38</sup> Cather, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle', 237.
- <sup>39</sup> Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1977), 33.
- <sup>40</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.
- <sup>41</sup> Robert Kroetsch, 'The Exploding Porcupine,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 109.
- <sup>42</sup> Carolyn Merchant notes how '[a]t the end of the nineteenth century, Frederic Jackson Turner's essay on the closing of the frontier in American history epitomized the heroic recovery narrative.' Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden', 143.
- <sup>43</sup> Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 8.
- <sup>44</sup> Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America*, 134.
- <sup>45</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Crom & Helm, 1984), 188.
- <sup>46</sup> Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden', 136.
- <sup>47</sup> Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 61.
- <sup>48</sup> Extract from Jefferson's letter to William Ludlow (6 September 1824) is quoted in Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 61. The letter can be found in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington DC, 1904), 74-5.
- <sup>49</sup> Cather, 'Nebraska: the End of the First Cycle', 238.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> In a recent article on Cather's progressivism Guy Reynolds writes of this passage: 'There is a toughness here, and a sense of laissez-faire capitalism that might have made a Populist wince; a Populist would also have rejected the latent social Darwinism of her judgement.' Reynolds, 'Willa Cather as progressive: politics and the writer,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. Marilee Lindemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 28.

- <sup>53</sup> Cather, 'Nebraska: the End of the First Cycle', 238.
- <sup>54</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 34.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>56</sup> In Roosevelt's version of Teutonism, Anglo-Saxon ethnogenesis originated in the British Isles and was the result of their relative isolation and historical interbreeding of Germanic tribes such as Saxons, Friesians, Norse, and Danes. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 45.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-51.
- <sup>58</sup> See for example Anders Stephenson's *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wing, 1995).
- <sup>59</sup> John Winthrop, 'A Model of Christian Charity': 'For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill,' in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (Third Edition), ed. N. Baym et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1989).
- <sup>60</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 18.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.
- <sup>62</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, 'The Young American,' *The Dial* 4 (1844): 489 & 491.
- <sup>63</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (Washington, 1893), 199-227.
- <sup>64</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, 'The World Movement,' in *History as Literature and Other Essays* (New York: Cosmio, 2006), 109 & 125.
- <sup>65</sup> Jean C. Griffith, 'How the West Was Whitened: "Racial" Difference on Cather's Prairie,' *Western American Literature* 41, 4 (Winter 2007): 413.
- <sup>66</sup> Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 67.
- <sup>67</sup> In her analysis of racial and ethnic relations on the Cather's prairie, Jean C. Griffith's notes that '...the "pretty picture" of Alexandra and Marie's racialized gender differences becomes implicated in what Melissa Ryan calls the novel's "deep anxiety" about "the process of civilization," a process that, with Marie and Emil's liaison, hints at the threat of relationships between different European races (276) [...] So while white racial diversity provides the novel's Divide with its cultural richness [...], the violent turn the plot takes suggests that such diversity must be maintained and contained simultaneously.' Griffith, 'How the West Was Whitened: "Racial" Difference on Cather's Prairie', 401.
- <sup>68</sup> See Brian Dippie's cultural history of the idea of Native Americans as a vanishing race and culture, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and US Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).
- <sup>69</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the influence of Virgil and Michelet on *O Pioneers!*, see chapter four of Susan J. Rosowski's *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* and Guy Reynolds' *Willa Cather in Context*, 47-48.
- <sup>70</sup> Ammons, 'Cather and the New Canon', 265.
- <sup>71</sup> Cather, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle', 237. In *A Lost Lady* the narrator offers an idyllic description of Captain Forrester's pioneering days on the plains: 'The freighters, after embarking in that sea of grass six hundred miles in width, lost all count of the days of the week and the month. One day was like another, and all were glorious; good hunting, plenty of antelope and buffalo, boundless sunny sky, boundless plains of waving grass, long freshwater lagoons yellow with lagoon flowers, where the bison in their periodic migrations stopped to drink and bathe and wallow.' *A Lost Lady*, 48.
- <sup>72</sup> Cather, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle', 237.
- <sup>73</sup> Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 47. From Jules Michelet, *The History of France* vol. 2, trans. G. H. Smith (London, 1845-47), 142.
- <sup>74</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 9.
- <sup>75</sup> 'Just as there is a close association between the Florentine discovery of the Ptolemaic grid co-ordinates and Brunelleschian perspective which was worked out on the chequerboard of the ideal city, so in the following century in Flanders we can observe an immediate connection between map-making and landscape art, as well as a broader cosmological resonance in the great panoramas by Breugel.' Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 147.
- <sup>76</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 173.
- <sup>77</sup> Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 12. Reynolds borrows the phrase from Robert Crunden's *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization 1889-1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

<sup>78</sup> Reynolds notes that Cather's novels 'encompass a spectrum of themes: the rise and fall of empires, racial diversity, conflict between pastoralism and technology, the Americanisation of European immigrants.' *Willa Cather in Context*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> The novel is prefaced by a line from Adam Mickiewicz' epic *Pan Tadeusz* (1834): 'Those fields, colored by various grain!'

<sup>80</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 70-71.

<sup>81</sup> Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>82</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, 34.

<sup>84</sup> Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, 69-70.

<sup>85</sup> Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 56.

<sup>86</sup> Mike Fischer makes a similar observation in 'Pastoralism and its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism' when he writes that *My Ántonia*'s 'account of conflicts between various selves and their others – an important theme in the novel – ignores the most significant Other in Nebraskan history: the Native Americans whose removal was seen as *sine qua non* for successful white settlement.' *Mosaic* 23, 1 (1990): 31.

<sup>87</sup> For an account of the historical context surrounding Cather's Nebraskan novels, see Mike Fischer, 'Pastoralism and its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism,' *Mosaic* 23, 1 (1990): 31-43.

<sup>88</sup> Cather, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle', 237.

<sup>89</sup> Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Ammons, 'Cather and the New Canon', 260.

<sup>91</sup> 'The "cultural pluralism" associated with the name Horace Kallen is an important precursor to multiculturalism. Kallen and his contemporary of the 1910s, the avowed cosmopolitan Randolph Bourne, are in some ways the models for the pluralist-cosmopolitan tension found in multiculturalism. Both share the basic idea that unites cultural pluralism with multiculturalism – that the nation should be home to a diversity of cultures, especially those carried by ethno-racial groups – but Bourne envisioned a dynamic interaction while Kallen stressed the autonomy of each group.' David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond multiculturalism* (New York, Basic Books, 1995), 11.

<sup>92</sup> Cather, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle', 238.

<sup>93</sup> Reynolds, *Willa Cather in Context*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> According to the author, contemporary east-coast representatives of the American literary establishment were disparaging about the Plains and pioneers as 'proper' literary topics. Van Wyck Brooks, for example, argued that the prevailing utilitarian business ethos of pioneers was responsible for turning America into a cultural wasteland. It seems Cather was aware of such attitudes since she writes on the subject of appropriate literary settings in American literature at the time of the publication of *O Pioneers!* that from an eastern perspective: '[a]s everyone knows, Nebraska is distinctly déclassé as a literary background; its very name throws the delicately attuned critic into a clammy shiver of embarrassment. Kansas is almost as unpromising.' Cather, *Willa Cather on Writing*, 94. This comment could have been addressed directly to Brooks. On the same page in the same essay, she also recalls a New York critic who at the time dismissed Plains fiction by declaring that 'I simply don't give a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes it.' What is interesting here, then, is that Cather seemingly did not intend to challenge or subvert the tastes or practices of the national literary establishment. Rather she set about applying them to the artistic and geographic void that the Plains were perceived as at the time in order to inscribe them onto the nation's literary map.

### 'Notes to Chapter 3'

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kroetsch, 'Author's Note,' in *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2000), 251.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, 'Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', *Arts Manitoba* 1, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1977): 32.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Wah, 'Introduction,' in *Completed Field Notes*, xi.

<sup>5</sup> Catharine R. Simpson, 'Charles Olson: Preliminary Images,' *boundary 2* 2, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1973-Winter 1974): 157.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kroetsch, 'Unhiding the Hidden,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 63.

<sup>7</sup> In relation to space and place Kroetsch's use of 'dis-cover' is influenced by Heidegger's concepts of 'vorfinden (literally, "as found there")' and 'erfindlich ("as discovered," but also "as invented")' as the German for what is here translated as "come across". The literary archaeologist discovers or invents in the etymological sense of 'to come across' (compare the Italian 'in veneri') what is already found there. In doing so, he is able to 'make room' through recording and notation (einräumen). In contrast to finding new virgin land, this type of un-veiling (ab-lehnen) signals that the poet is always already emplaced and that his un-hiding relates to the world he is in the midst of, his being-there. Related to the practice of this mode of spatial discovery are two other Heideggarian terms, 'Destruktion' and 'Abbau', which refer to a process of breaking down and building up. Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 250.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of Kroetsch's novels and criticism from the perspective of Derridean deconstruction see Dianne Tiefensee, *"The Old Dualities" Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and His Critics* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Veil of Knowing,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 191.

<sup>10</sup> Kroetsch, 'Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 152. Elsewhere in the essay Kroetsch writes on the discursive construction of Canada as a colonial and imperial nation: 'Frye, in his decent and quiet and radical way, tells the Canadian poet to be anti-colonial. We are a nation made of the waste of the narrative of empire, a nation made of wars won and lost, of peace treaties and their humiliations and their prophecies, of retreating people tempted to glorify their retreat, of the acquisitions of land and resources under the guise of pastoral utopias.' (159)

<sup>11</sup> The triple pun on sight/citing/siting in Kroetsch's field notes is attributable to Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson in a discussion with the writer: 'Walter Benjamin apparently spent much of his mature life collecting quotations which he used to show people. He looked upon his crowning achievement as perhaps a collection of quotations, the work of quotations, an activity that catches all the sense of sight/cite/site: he would, in each case, be *sighting/citing* that which he was pulling up out of the quarry (*site*) of the collection.' Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, 1982), 168.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), xxi-xxii.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. ed./trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-40.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-206.

<sup>18</sup> Kroetsch, 'Beyond Nationalism,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Kroetsch, 'Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 152.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 30.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 138.

<sup>23</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> The kind of 'not know' proposed here may be described as Heideggarian in the sense outlined by the author in the introduction to this chapter. It un-hides the absences and void that demarcate the limits of the always already meanings of, in this case, the prairie place. The state of knowing/not knowing situates the poet inside the always already of history and language and helps him realise 'that the root meaning of the word truth is un-concealing, dis-closing, dis-covering, un-hiding.' As we shall see in the case of 'Seed Catalogue', Kroetsch's adaptation of Heideggarian un-concealing and Derridean deconstruction not only enables violation and voiding but also a series of place-making flights that inscribe themselves positively and negatively on the pages of the poem. The dialogics between the two is summed up in the lines: 'West is a winter place./ The palimpsest of prairie/ under the quick erasure/ of snow, invites a flight.' Kroetsch, *Completed Field Notes*, 45.



- <sup>27</sup> Kroetsch, 'Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 152.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>29</sup> George Bowering, 'Stone Hammer Narrative,' *Open Letter* 6: 2-3 (1985): 140.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Terry Eagleton comments on Roland Barthes' reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine* in *S/Z* (1970) that '[t]he literary work is now no longer treated as a stable object or delimited structure, and the language of the critic has disowned all pretensions to scientific objectivity. The most intriguing texts for criticism are not those which can be *read*, but those which are 'writable' (scriptible) – texts which encourage the critic to carve them up, transpose them into different discourses, produce his or her semi-arbitrary play of meaning athwart the work itself. The reader or critic shifts from the role of consumer to that of producer.' Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1983), 119.
- <sup>32</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Exploding Porcupine,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 115.
- <sup>33</sup> Bowering, 'Stone Hammer Narrative', 142.
- <sup>34</sup> Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 139-40.
- <sup>35</sup> Kroetsch, 'Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 152.
- <sup>36</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Moment of Discovery of America Continues,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 8.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>38</sup> Simona Bertacco, *Out of Place: The Writings of Robert Kroetsch* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), 150.
- <sup>39</sup> See footnote 31 above.
- <sup>40</sup> Eli Mandel, 'American "West" and Canadian "Region,"' in *Crossing Frontiers. Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1979), 105.
- <sup>41</sup> Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country. The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1977), 44.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.
- <sup>43</sup> In an article, 'Passage by Land' in *The Narrative Voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors*, Rudy Wiebe elaborates his argument for a place-making fiction of the Canadian prairies: '[T]o touch this land with words requires an architectural structure; to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or a skyscraper over and into space... You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build a giant artifact. No song can do that; it must be giant fiction.' *The Narrative Voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 259.
- <sup>44</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Exploding Porcupine,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 115.
- <sup>45</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Veil of Knowing,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 180.
- <sup>46</sup> See for example Diane D. Quantic, *The Nature of the Place* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
- <sup>47</sup> Simpson, op.cit., 157.
- <sup>48</sup> Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 139-40.
- <sup>49</sup> Laurie Ricou, 'Prairie Poetry and Metaphors of Plain/s Space,' *Great Plains Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 117.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 113.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 117.
- <sup>52</sup> In his account of post-structuralism Terry Eagleton writes on Derridean deconstruction: 'Derrida is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for him an ultimately political practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force.' Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 148.
- <sup>53</sup> Kroetsch, 'The Exploding Porcupine,' in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 109.
- <sup>54</sup> On the topic of death in 'Seed Catalogue' Douglas Reimer notes '[t]hat the question of dying is central to *Seed Catalogue* is made clear by the preponderance of deaths in it: the mother in her grave when the poem begins; the magpie and badger, one shot at and killed by the father (112); the husband who has been buried "with his ass sticking out of the ground" (117); the Crees "surprised...to death" (121) on the Oldman River by the Bloods; Pete Knight, "King/ of All cowboys" (123) – whose death by (121) on the Oldman River by the Bloods; Pete Knight, "King/ of All cowboys" (123) – whose death by falling off a horse, implicates the poet, who has also fallen of his horse, in his own death); Henry L. Kroetsch, patriarch, whose "last will and testament" (124) are recorded in the poem; Freddie Kroetsch, the best barn builder in the area, dead but "remembered" (124) by the poet; the poet's cousin Kenneth MacDonald whose bomber is shot down over Cologne in 1943 (126); and finally Adam and Eve

themselves who we are told “got drowned” (127).’ Douglas Reimer, ‘Heideggarian Elements in Robert Kroetsch’s “Seed Catalogue,”’ *Canadian Literature* 136, (Spring 1993): 124.

<sup>55</sup> Kroetsch, ‘Unhiding the Hidden,’ in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 63.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>57</sup> Kroetsch, ‘Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye,’ in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 152.

<sup>58</sup> Kroetsch, ‘Unhiding the Hidden,’ in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 58.

<sup>59</sup> Kroetsch, ‘The Grammar of Silence,’ in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 92-94.

<sup>60</sup> Tiefertsee writes that by setting up ‘a system of binary opposites: game versus system, discontinuity versus continuity, incompleteness versus completeness, the fragmented self versus the unified self...’ Kroetsch intends to ‘subvert the metaphysical implications of conventional narrative.’ But in doing so, she argues, he in fact allows ‘Presence’ to ‘reassert itself through the negation that elevates one term over its other.’ Tiefertsee, *The Old Dualities*, 88.

<sup>61</sup> Dianne Tiefertsee summarizes Derrida’s analysis of the relationship between speech and writing in Western philosophy since Plato by writing that ‘[l]ogocentrism is also a phonocentrism. Voice is privileged by virtue of the presumed “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (12). This prioritizing of Voice requires that speech be privileged over writing, as indeed it has been, at least since Plato’s condemnation of the poets in the *Republic* and his condemnation of writing in the *Phaedrus*’. Tiefertsee, *The Old Dualities*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> Bertacco, *Out of Place*, 63.

<sup>63</sup> Perhaps the clearest example is found in a passage of imperial-colonial pastiche and mimicry in ‘The Ledger’: “‘With no effort of pretension to literary merit, the object will be rather to present a plain statement of facts of general interest which bear upon the past growth and development of this wonderfully prosperous section of the Province, in such manner as to render future comparisons more easy, and offer to the rising generation an incentive to emulation in the examples of the pioneers, whose self-reliant industry and progressive enterprise have conquered the primeval forests, and left in their stead, as a heritage to posterity, a country teeming with substantial comforts and material wealth, and reflecting in its every feature the indomitable spirit and true manliness of a noble race, whose lives and deeds will shine while the communities they have founded shall continue to exist.”’ Kroetsch, *Completed Field Notes*, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Tiefertsee, *The Old Dualities*, 88.

<sup>65</sup> Tiefertsee, *The Old Dualities*, 157.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 212.

<sup>67</sup> Kroetsch, *Completed Field Notes*, 251.

<sup>68</sup> Kroetsch, ‘Unhiding the Hidden,’ in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> Kroetsch, ‘Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy,’ in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*.

<sup>70</sup> Kroetsch, ‘Beyond Nationalism,’ in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 68.

## ‘Notes to Chapter 4’

<sup>1</sup> Susan Naramore Maher, ‘Deep Mapping the Great Plains: Surveying the Literary Cartography of Place,’ *Western American Literature* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 6.

<sup>2</sup> In his review of *PrairieEarth* in *The New York Times Book Review*, Paul Theroux writes on the question of genre that the text ‘would rather uncertainly be catalogued in a library under “Topography.”’, before asking, ‘And yet what is it? It is history, travel, anthropology, geography, journalism, confession, memoir, natural history, and autobiography.’ Paul Theroux, ‘The Wizard of Kansas,’ *New York Times Book Review*, October 27, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 87.

<sup>4</sup> Alan O. Weltzien, ‘Topographic Map of Words,’ *Great Plains Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Spring, 1999): 110.

<sup>5</sup> However, these two-part framing chapters are not only noteworthy from a formal and structural point of view but also topically. They signal the travel writer’s position in relation to the landscape he is mapping as well as the direction and movement of his travels. Whereas the introductory ‘On Roniger Hill’ alludes to the static, elevated, and detached vantage point of a cartographer or traditional landscape artists, the concluding ‘Across the Kaw Trail’ in ‘Circlings’ suggests non-linear, circumforanean travel on foot along ancient indigenous lines.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 201.



<sup>7</sup> On the interrelations between representations of space (such as the cartographic grid), their role in the production of social spaces, and their figurative usage Graham Huggan writes: [t]he contributory role played by spatial metaphors in the engineering of social change has been noted by the feminist critic Annette Kolodny. In her book *The Lay of the Land*, Kolodny analyses the complex interrelations between cultural perception, social construction, and linguistic transformation in the pioneer period of American history. The success of the first American settlers, argues Kolodny, 'depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else – a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation' (7). Yet it also depended on the viability of emergent cultural myths. These myths were disseminated through a range of metaphors for transforming the wilderness. 'Mapping' the new land, for instance, entailed both physical transformation and conceptual appropriation; related spatial metaphors such as 'the possession of the virgin continent' allowed the American settlers to gain and maintain control of their environment through the expression of a pastoral myth.' Graham Huggan, *Territorial Disputes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 14-5.

<sup>8</sup> Quotation from J.B. Jackson's *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984) appears in 'From the Commonplace Book: Hymer' Moreover, in *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* Jackson juxtaposes and relates the political landscape to an inhabited one: '[t]hese two landscapes – the political and the one which for brevity's sake I call the inhabited landscape – in real life are always found together. As a usual thing the political landscape is on a larger, more impressive scale, more permanent and easier to spot, whereas the inhabited landscape is likely to be poor and small and hard to find. But both of them, in one degree or another, are always there, and it is only when we discuss them in the abstract that we are able to separate them.' John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Crom & Helm, 1984), 188.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative,' in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 49.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Casey explains that to Deleuze and Guattari smooth space in contrast to striated space 'is heterogeneous and filled with "qualitative multiplicities" (in Bergson's term) that resist exact centration or reproduction, and all the more so universalization. In such space we are always immersed in a particular palpable and nonplaniform field on which we cannot take an external point of view (even though, paradoxically, to be in that field is to engage in "outside thought" vis-à-vis royal science).' Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 303.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Quotation from J. B. Jackson's *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984) appears in 'From the Commonplace Book: Hymer'.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: London: W.W. Norton and Co, 1987), 77.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Annette Kolodny, *Lay of the Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> Yuri Lotman. *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 239.

<sup>19</sup> Lefebvre, op. cit., 190.

<sup>20</sup> For a representative range of Midwestern prospects, see <http://www.historicmapworks.com>.

<sup>21</sup> Cosgrove, op. cit., 176.

<sup>22</sup> Lefebvre, op. cit., 296-97.

<sup>23</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xi.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xxxv.

<sup>25</sup> In their 'Treatise on Nomadology' Deleuze and Guattari write on form and matter: 'For Simondon exposes the technological insufficiency of the matter-form model, in that it assumes a fixed form and a matter deemed homogenous. [In this case space] It is the idea of the law that assures the model's coherence, since laws are what submit matter to this or that form, and conversely, realize in matter a given property deduced from the form. But Simondon demonstrates that the *hylomorphic* model leaves many things, active and affective, by the wayside. *On the one hand, to the formed or formable matter we must add an entire energetic materiality in movement, carrying singularities or haecceities that are already like implicit forms that are topological, rather than geometrical, [...]* it is a question of surrendering to the wood, then following where it leads by connecting operations to a materiality, instead of imposing a form upon matter: what one addresses is less a matter submitted to laws than a

materiality possessing a *nomos*.' Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), 408.

<sup>26</sup> 'Reproducing implies the permanence of a fixed point of view that is external to what is reproduced: watching the flow from the bank. But following is something different from the ideal of reproduction...One is obliged to follow when one is in search of the "singularities" of matter, or rather of a material, and not out to discover a form; [...] when one ceases to contemplate the course of a laminar flow in a determinate direction, to be carried away by a vortical flow; when one engages in a continuous variation of variables, instead of extracting constants from them, etc. And the meaning of Earth completely changes: with the legal model, one is constantly reterritorializing around a point of view, on a domain, according to a set of constant relations; but with the ambulant model, the process of deterritorialization constitutes and extends the territory itself.' Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 372.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>30</sup> Limerick, op. cit., 25.

<sup>31</sup> See the chapter, 'Gatsby on the Plains' in Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: a spiritual geography* (Boston: New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 45-64.

<sup>32</sup> *PrairyErth: a deep map* (London: Andrew Deutsch, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Casey, op. cit., 311-12.

<sup>34</sup> In his discussion of Bachelardian topoanalysis, Edward Casey remarks that 'a direct corollary of topoanalysis is this: taken seriously, topoanalysis undermines temporocentrism. The more we attend to the topoi of psychic life, the more we realize that this life – contrary to what Kant and Bergson, James and Husserl contend – is not merely a function of its durational flow. Space rather than time, is the form of "inner sense." Even though Heat-Moon's topoanalysis is not strictly Bachelardian, it nonetheless takes an inward turn when mapping in dreamtime. Casey, op. cit., 288-89.

<sup>35</sup> In a review of *PrairyErth* Gerald Vizenor writes, 'Heat-Moon, a "pen name from his Osage ancestor," creates a county with no more than romantic traces of native tribal cultures.' *World Literature Today* 66, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 386.

<sup>36</sup> Stephanie LeMenager writes in *Manifest and Other Destinies* that 'Dainotto has complained that regionalism has been a rhetorical form which obscures the erasures performed by Western European and U.S. imperialism'. LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 215.

## 'Notes to Conclusion'

<sup>1</sup> Rosowski, 'Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady*,' in *Geography and Literature. A Meeting of the Disciplines*, 83.

Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, 9 & 2.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Winters, *Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin, 'Cather Criticism and the American Canon,' *College English* 59, no. 2 (Feb. 1997): 208.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, 'Cather and the New Canon: "The Old Beauty" and the Issue of Empire,' *Cather Studies* 3 (1996): 5.

<sup>6</sup> Quantic, *The Nature of the Place*, 149.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Pease, 'Postnational Politics and American Studies,' 49<sup>th</sup> parallel: *An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies* 8 (Summer 2001), <http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/>.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Kollin, 'Introduction: Postwestern Studies, Dead or Alive,' in *Postwestern Cultures. Literature, Theory, Space*, ed. Susan Kollin, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xi.

<sup>9</sup> Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 6. The term was coined by Lauren Berlant in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Comer, *Landscapes of the New West*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, 'Cather and the New Canon': 256-266.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 257.

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<sup>13</sup> Ammons, op. cit., 257.

<sup>14</sup> Guy Reynolds, 'Willa Cather as progressive,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. Marilee Lindemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Roberto Dainotto, 'All the Regions Do Smilingly Revolt': The Literature of Place and Region', *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Spring 1996): 486.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 489.

<sup>17</sup> Hsuan L. Hsu, 'Literature and Regional Production', *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 38.

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